

DINNER WITH THE LYNX

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ABSTRACT

Dinner with the Lynx

Sarah Brown

"Canada is the essence of not being. Not English, not American, it is the mathematic of not being. And a subtle flavour — we're more like celery as a flavour." Comedian Mike Myers' summary reflects a contemporary and pervasive pop-culture interpretation of the country, one which this collection of short stories explores. *Dinner with the Lynx* is a series of stories interconnected by ideas of "place" in relation to Canadian culture. Setting is a major feature; each story is set in Canada and highlights the localized vernacular and kitsch of its respective city or town. The writing is preoccupied with the Canadian body in its many forms: biological, political, geographic. It fixates on these various iterations, whether explored through a character's body or the body politic of a specific place, as a venue for cultural self-definition. Plotlines play with contemporary hallmarks of Canadana, from B.C.'s Hastings Street havoc to Saskatchewan's crop circles to the elusive lynx of the Northwest. These stories follow in the footsteps of such Canadian-themed collections as *All the Anxious Girls on Earth* by ZsuZsi Gartner, *Daydreams of Angels* by Heather O'Neill, *Floating like the Dead* by Yasuko Thanh, *Hellgoing* by Lynn Coady, and *Born with a Tooth* by Joseph Boyden.

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GHOSTS IN THE WALDORF

There are three vacant floors of the Waldorf on East Hastings Street, Vancouver. The top floor is a tiki bar, palm fronds mimicking an oceanfront. The middle floor holds stages and spotlights. The basement has dark mirror and dance floors. Cutting through the centre of the three floors is a staircase. This staircase is broad and curved and elegantly carpeted. In the middle, heaped on a step, vomiting stomach acid, is you.

You are a man minus gainful employment and several teeth. This province certifies you as three things: a hepatitis C carrier, a former Bronze Cross swimmer, and a longstanding opioid addict. In the helm of a Ziploc bag somewhere there is a driver's license confirming your name; without it, you are faceless. It's probably floating somewhere in the Pacific by now. You shoot heroin when you can get it, cut preferably with citric acid but most often with shoe polish. Its telltale tar pelt lasts a few hours and leaves you soft and worked-over, a lolling starfish. You last lolled twenty-three hours ago. Now you're resting your cheek in a pool of bile and listening to the words of Mr. Hamish Bridgewald, a ghost.

He appeared about an hour ago and is still attempting to engage you in conversation.

"Realtors or rats," he says again. "You're in the middle, my lad."

You know he's a ghost because he has no scent. It sounds oxymoronic but Hastings Street has trained your olfactory senses keener than most, alerting you to the spoiled offerings of doorways and Styrofoam. A doctor once told you it's reverse Darwinism, but that doctor was an asshole in multiple ways. Yet here Bridgewald is, sporting a three-piece suit with gloves and bowler hat and groomed beard. If you shut

your eyes and open them, he's still there.

"Twenty-three hours," you say out loud. You're shivering, and you need to keep track. You know the sound of your own voice helps. It's a reminder that you haven't vanished.

"Is that it?" the ghost replies. "Myself, I've been here since 1947. I was a guest back when the Waldorf was bright as a new penny — though, now, I've seen it through all of its days. Hotel to nightclub to bankruptcy. You've probably placed my accent as the Queen's English. I was a Cambridge man, naturally: scholar, casual polo-player, and alcoholic. A high-functioning one, I'd say, but my liver wouldn't agree. I died in the master suite and my soul remained in this building hereafter."

"Christ." You don't typically hallucinate, and you've never had one persist this vividly before. You need a cell phone; you'll call your ex, hope she won't hang up. But you can't walk. Your muscles are closed like clamshells.

"The phone, it might still work here. This place, it shut down not long ago . . . I remember . . ."

"Correct," the ghost replies. "Above us are the realtors, and below us — well, the basement has been left a tad decrepit since the closure, it's home to a family of rats. Equally interesting creatures. However, the former are holding a showing today, and I suggest you consider moving yourself if you don't want any trouble."

You try, but your limbs feel waterlogged. You can remember pushing open a door, crawling for cover, later attempting to descend the stairs. Upstairs, you can hear voices.

"So, we'll start with the top floor. I'm betting we can sell these paintings for a fortune to some collector. Black velvet. What tacky crap. Anyway, remember the plan, Patricia — focus on lot size, avoid proximity to crackheads. Twenty-four thousand square feet and fifty on-site parking stalls. We'll take them past that new JJ Bean a few blocks up, show how this neighborhood is *up-and-coming*. Every thirty-year-old worth his vinyl collection will get in line for a mortgage payment. And yes, proximity to bus lines, oceanfront parks — Jesus, the smell in here. Can you spray some perfume? What? You look like the kind of woman who'd carry perfume on her. All right, could you buy some Lysol? I can rehearse the tour up here, if you'll tackle the middle floor."

"Hey," you say to the ghost, "spare change?" It feels good to crack a joke. There are times when hoarse strung-out laughter is the only sound binding the Downtown Eastside. That or screaming, depending on your luck. Besides, if Bridgewald was real and as loaded as his suit suggests, you could be flying home free soon.

Bridgewald reveals his empty ghost pockets. "I do apologize."

As expected. You know the upper class, even the undead upper class, are never good for it. Rather, the best places to collect change are street corners near buskers — wallets are already out, music's playing, people feel inspired — or when desperate, independent cafés with unguarded tip jars. Setting up camp near Crab Park is a popular move, too; you guess the grandeur of the waves makes people feel humbled, somehow more charitable. If the Waldorf was still buzzing you'd target the patrons in their leis and

drunk reveries, give them the chance to flush out their consciences.

In your pocket there's the leftover cotton holding the detritus from your last high, and you could cook it to squeeze out the last drops. You wrap trembling fingers around your lighter, but pause when the voices above persist.

"Here's the Lysol, Peter. Listen, I still think we should discuss damage control based on the pushback. I mean, Facebook is full of these bleeding hearts calling for heritage status. We need to prepare a response. Tell the developers the city will never preserve this place, it'll turn into a squatting ground for the addicts. To tell you the truth, it gives me the creeps now that it's empty. Looks like a beach ball threw up on the hotel from *The Shining*. Oh, hah, riiight, it's haunted. Anyway, again, Peter, *here is the Lysol*. You can take it down for a spray and I'll continue working up here."

"Oh, dear," says Bridgewald. "Looks like our time for chatting is going to be cut short."

You tuck away the cotton and prepare to crawl further down. Rats aren't that bad. The original stowaways, breeding in the bilge wells of ships. They're probably friendlier than most people. Bridgewald isn't that bad, either. Company is nice, however transparent it may be.

"I've got to hide," you say.

"Right, then. Sorry to see you off, but take care." Bridgewald tips his hat. You attempt to navigate your knees, but upon rising everything sways. You crumple. You

think of scurvy, of sailor corpses, the rollicking of tide.

"I surmise it's for the best," Bridgewald comments, as you heave until the water from your mouth foams red. "I don't suppose your rabies vaccination is up-to-date."

"If you got me a rabies shot," you tell him, after some deep breaths, "I could inject it into any vein you name." Not many people understand the bitter pride that comes with hitting blood right away.

"I don't doubt it," Bridgewald says. "I knew how to sneak a quart of whiskey into the poshest of afternoon teas. All addicts have their knowledge, after all."

It's true. There are three places on your right arm that you know the best. First is the dark cavern of the outer bicep. It's got the big mole and bigger scar. Then the forearm with its mass of punctures. Finally, the interior of the upper arm, its vein collapsed, a corporeal retort to needles. You learned the names of your veins at the safe injection center on Hastings/Columbia.

"Radial," the nurse taught you. "Basilic. Cephalic."

As a child, back in school, you learned words like *crustacean*, *boisterous*, *median*. These words were your favourite. Through saying them you'd garner a different kind of attention, a good kind. You learned that three-syllable words shaped you into something respectable. They were not merely words; they were symbols.

But at InSite it was uncanny, a nurse watching you perform the familiar process: elastic round the bicep, mud filtered into the syringe, veins knotted like kelp. You were quiet, hazy, comfortable. The staff looked at you if you shook or sputtered but otherwise they moved past, performed their work. You were there and not there. You came up for air, faded out.

"What's it like?" you ask Bridgewald, despite yourself. "You know, being like that."

He looks like he's been waiting his whole ghost-life to be asked this question.

"Like dangling in the last remnants of a dream. I've tried many times to rationalize it. I thought about the Bible, I consulted the cantos."

"Cantos?"

"Cantos, old bean, cantos. *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, blessed *Paradisio*. Three liminal places. According to Dante, we all end up in one of them, and I've been trying seventy-nine years to figure out which one I'm in."

"I don't think I need to go down there just yet, Patricia. Let's be honest, our main show-and-tell will be the top floor. Maybe you can lead them through a quick peek down the stairs, but Jesus, let's try to keep them out of the basement. Rats or no rats, just remember: three floors can turn into sleek, independently-heated, three-thousand-square-foot units — don't forget to mention the lease rate per square foot. If you'd like, I'll highlight these numbers in the proposal while you give the middle a clean-up."

"I don't think they'll ever make it down here," you tell Bridgewald.

"Yes," he agrees. "They've been here for the past few days and have yet to step below the top floor. Though it's been immensely interesting, learning how the market has changed."

"Oh, yeah?" You lean your head back and try to listen. You could use a distraction.

"This place," he continues, "was a cultural landmark but it could not reconcile its lavishness with its *artiste affamé* clientele. The owners hung artisanal lightbulbs, vintage Polynesian paintings. They served imported hulled coconuts with rum at the tiki bar — a delicious and hydrating beverage, mind you — and yet there was no soap in the washrooms. That awful paper-thin toilet tissue."

You get it. It's always one or the other. Your ex was the type of person who prided herself on her Charmin Ultra. Late on paying rent again but look, here in our bathroom, the three-ply hallmark of the bourgeoisie. She'd never let you come inside her so you'd sponge semen off her stomach using Charmin's cottony opulence, and she'd lean back like a salted sea goddess with the Hastings-Sunrise traffic shaking the walls.

You met at the hospital's hep-C treatment centre. She had it too and she hated it, and eventually she hated you. It happened, you fucked up, you slipped up and shot up, you failed. Now she keeps up the barrier; ignores your calls, chucks your old photographs. It makes you feel like a phantom, slipping through briny air.

"Ever been in love?" you ask Bridgewald.

"Oh, yes." Bridgewald is matter-of-fact. "In my first few years as a specter, I remained convinced that love was the reason my soul perpetuated after death. The whole purpose for my *élan vital* remaining tethered to this earth."

"Okay. And now?"

"Now, I take a much more existential point of view: we have evolved past our capacity for caring. All love is a pursuit for self-justification. The individual trumps all."

"I don't think so," you cough, but the pitying look in Bridgewald's face causes you to stop.

"Well, I suppose," he shrugs, "that despite our differing beliefs, we're both stuck here — wherever we are."

You can't be so sure. At the Strathcona library you can access a limbo built of the internet's smack forums, places to talk mainlining and cuts, the pain of withdrawal. Last time, a girl uploaded a photo of her body under fluorescent light, asking if her track marks — the barnacles sprouting from hands, arms, groin — would prevent her from finding true love. It was such a barefaced, naive question that you became acutely aware of the pain again, and had to shut down the computer and go shoot up, turn both black. That was yesterday. You must be coming up on twenty-four hours.

"Peter, for all we know, it could be a disaster down there. Don't you remember the type of parties they used to throw? I wouldn't be surprised if there are stale pot brownies and bondage gags and someone's sob-story song lyrics below us. Wait, it's noon — want to make a run for the juice bar? I bought the Lysol, so you could get me back with a kale-and-seaweed and a mineral water. After, we could try tackling the middle together."

Their words remind you of your thirst, though you've never tasted liquid seaweed. There is something in the nine-dollar green juice that propels this city forward, its clear-skinned spirits floating past one another with faces angled down at smartphones, never colliding.

At InSite you learned that the human body is sixty percent water, and that's why we buoy up in the sea. You wonder if tiny phytoplankton swim in the green juice, if they immortalize the insides of those who sip it. You wonder if ghosts can float.

"Can you get me a glass of water?" you ask Bridgewald.

"I'm sorry," he replies. "As a specter, I don't have that capability."

You can't help but groan.

"Dead man's plight," he apologizes. "Although I suppose in some ways, I'm living a scholar's dream. Endless pontification, you know! I get to theorize and theorize."

"What—what do you theorize?"

"Oh, I was a student of history. I find the area surrounding the Waldorf quite interesting, you see, in its economic decline. I studied the once-spectacular British colonies of yore which sat in this very place, and over years — truly, so many years of analysis — I've come to the realization that something may have gone quite wrong from the get-go."

"What was it?"

"Well, quite broadly, it's the idea of centralization. Creating localized hubs was the success of my forefathers, but I fear this centralism has birthed the kind of city-structure which enables neighborhoods to fall into ghetto. The needy are confined to a narrow place and prevented from entering into other neighborhoods, and in this confinement the cleaning-up of said neighborhood becomes impossible. A vicious circle."

"I . . ." You shake yourself awake. "Yeah, yeah, it's tough to leave. You have to stay here to get social housing, you know."

"Well, there's no changing history, anyway," he sighs.

"No?" Now your nausea is returning, threefold.

"Well, I certainly can't, sadly. As I said, I can only pontificate. I must admit, as time goes on I find it so emotionally taxing, these ethical deliberations, that I've been producing commentary mostly on aesthetics, and wine pairings."

"Does anyone else hear you?"

He laughs. "I suppose some of them might. However, my dear fellow, you're the only one who's been crazy enough to answer."

"Patricia, I'm not juicing anymore. Did you know that the buildup of kale's potassium can actually be toxic to your body? I emailed around an exposé recently. It's a nice suggestion, us working down there together, but I feel like it's a waste of resources for both of us to use our time that way. Don't get all sulky, just think of the numbers — *thirteen point three* — say it with me, Patricia. No, enunciate. Are you mumbling on purpose? Practice a quick vocal exercise with me. Come on, think of the commission riding on this. *How can a clam cram into a clean cream can?* Good. And again."

"My bones hurt," you whisper, as the staircase continues to blur. Your body is twitching. You need methadone, but even the nearest clinic is too far.

"I'm sorry." Bridgewald sounds sincerely pained. "I wish I could help you, but I can't."

"Just a glass of water," you say wistfully. "A blanket, I'm cold . . ."

"I often forget the human comforts," Bridgewald says.

In this state it's easy for you to forget, too. You force yourself to look past the carpet's reeling colours and remember the human things. Your mother's laugh, your pre-accident backstroke, and your ex, of course. You remember the smell of her breath, her hair, the heaviness of her breasts. You remember the summer spent teaching her how to swim in salt water. This is how you categorize your moments of happiness; in your mind, they're spaced out like puncture marks. When you're high, the bits connecting them — the stretches of unbroken skin — fade away and you work back to the middle, inhabit those moments again.

All in all, it still amazes you that human beings have been able to synthesize that state. That opium-milk happiness, clear as a conch shell's thrum of waves. Contentment bottled and called back from the dead.

"Well, that's fine, Peter. Know what this proves? I'm not afraid to get my hands dirty. Did you know they did poetry readings here for that magazine, the one that homeless people sell on street corners? Once, I even bought a copy. That's right. How many charitable donations did you make last year? I don't know, I read a few pages and had to put it down, it was so upsetting. Okay, keep rolling your eyes. Go back to the proposal. I can navigate this."

There are three ways, you think, that a person can navigate the world. The earth, whether by foot or something with wheels. Flying, brief time spent bird-like. Or crossing water: land, air, sea. You've spent so much of your time on the ground and have never been on an airplane, but the third you miss above all others. The rush of water over head and shoulders and always the feeling of going forward, a movement towards a conclusion, even if the ending was just pool tiles. You think about it now as the Waldorf swims before you.

"You look nostalgic," says Bridgewald. "I understand. Often I dream of a great ship built to carry me home. I came to North America by boat and still remember the songs of the sailors. *Oh, have you heard the news, me Johnny —*"

"I don't know it," you cough, "but it sounds nice."

"Yes? Well, I'll continue. *Only one more day a-howlin', can't you hear the gals a-callin' —*"

You retch until a searing pain hits you in the chest, and your head sinks back into the pool.

"*Oh, we're homeward bound today, Johnny, we'll leave her without sorrow, Johnny —*"

You try to follow him, drift away to the idea of homeland, but you don't know what happened to yours. So you picture Hastings Street before its golden age and urine-sprayed demise, before ships, before skin, until you are miniscule. A microbe taking its first crawl out of the sea. Your breath begins to stiffen, as if to imitate the surprise of unaccustomed lungs.

"Okay, Patricia, I've re-highlighted all the key points in the proposal, in order of relevance — blue are most important, yellow are conversational filler, green are . . . Patricia? Patricia?"

It is telling that the need for another high stays alive and well. It's been chewing at your insides as you talked to Bridgewald. It's been pushing at your temples as you gagged. Now, even as a scream fails to enliven your figure, the need is there, just like the ghost, solemnly watching. A strong thing. A cockroach-like thing, surviving.

"Oh, dear," whispers Bridgewald. "Sit up."

All that comes up for you, though, is vomit.

A woman's voice. "Oh, my God," she says. "Oh, my God."

A man's voice, now, rife with revulsion, something unintelligible.

"Take hold of this man," Bridgewald commands from somewhere beside you.

"Gentleman, lady, lift his arms! Can you not see what's happening?"

They can't hear him. Your breaths careen into a leveled choke.

Her voice cuts through, something about an ambulance.

You want to turn your head toward her, but you can't. You want to reach out, clutch Bridgewald's waistcoat, but you can't. You can only open your eyes to glimpse the great ceiling of the Waldorf, spread out like a gift of unusable extravagance.

A drop of water falls from one of its crannies. It moves with interminable speed, coming down upon your forehead.

The staircase leaks away. You are moving, far away from Bridgewald and the

woman and the Waldorf, into something. It's not so bad, you think. You are surging forward. You could be underwater. You could be swimming.

MAMA OMIDA

It's here — amidst blue skies and popcorn stands and sugary puke and the rainbow-gilded Ferris Wheel, amidst gum-snapping girls and pimply ride attendants, amidst sunscreen and Lysol and deep-fryer steam — that you meet Mama Omida.

It's the first time you've been properly introduced, though you've seen her before, of course. This time, however, you're different. You've shaved your dreadlocks off clean at the root, baring a tender scalp that's receiving its first five-o'-clock shadow. It's unbridling, liberating, the cool air against your neck and the fact that you could pass for either a boy or girl. You are new; a shimmering, shape-shifting lizard. You can push back the drapes of her tent and step inside: unafraid, determined, ready.

She still recognizes you, though. She sees the future, after all.

"Hmm," she grunts, then bares a purplish smile. "Have I seen you around here before?"

There's beaded cloth draped over the dirt, air stiff and warm between silken walls. You shrug.

"Young people don't know how to talk," she scoffs, her accent blunting the words. "So why have you come? You want your tea leaves read?" She raises an eyebrow. "It costs ten dollars, you know."

You shift. You don't have the money for that.

Perhaps she intuits that too.

"Relax," she says after a moment. "There is no need to be nervous. Come sit."

You can hold her gaze without flinching. You can take in her face. She's wrinkled

and freckled and folded in her scarves and bangles, snagging on the modern gloss of smartphones and briefcases, drenched in a blood-orange scent.

You smell like nothing, except maybe the day-old remnants of shaving cream.

After you kneel on the rug, she hands you a cup. Steam pools up, dregs unfurl in the bottom. They remind you of the chopped, briny locks of your hair on the floor.

"The first thing to know," Mama begins, straightening herself, "is that the tea is much more like a centrepiece. I see things in the leaves, yes. But what matters most is what happens during our time together — I feel your spirit come out in the *conversation*." Enunciation drawn out, a slight rolling of the *r*.

Con. Vairrr. Say. Sion.

You silently mouth the words. You can make yourself sound different, too.

She gestures to your cup. "So now you drink up. And you tell me—" A half-smile on her lips. "Why do you want to tell fortunes?"

You exit the tent forty-five minutes later, belly full of hot water, clutching a card in your hand. Slightly light-headed. A buzzing in your limbs.

A candle appeared in your cup. Mama pointed it out first: the matchstick likeness, water wicking off the dregs like a flame. "Enlightenment. Intelligence, if fostered by guidance. Divine potential, oh yes."

Your scalp is beginning to itch. You wonder if she could sense something in you from the beginning; if she had peeled back her curtains and watched you spend days loitering around the PNE vendors, bumming tickets to ride the wooden roller coaster,

asking ponytailed girls about job openings at the Whac-a-Mole. Perhaps some grand celestial plan aligned when you stumbled into her tent. You went in to have your fortune told, and came out with a job.

You've never considered yourself particularly spiritual, but this doesn't evoke too much concern. You can recall trembling fingers against a Ouija board. A slightly morbid obsession with rewatching *Carrie* on late-night TV. Now everything seems explained: all of the fruitless hours spent staring downwards, trying to piece together lumps of math equations or past participles, scratching the tubers twisting out of your scalp. Dandruff on the aged, scratched wood like stardust — constellations spilled from tangled roots. You drew paths in it with your fingers. Disgusting, they said. But you were actually tracing maps. Whole destinies.

And now you're holding her card. Her name in curving scrawl atop a stencil of a caterpillar. A phone number, a web address printed in Gothic Sans — Mama Omida is on Facebook. Thin laminate cut with scissors, half-peeling away.

Luck has found you before high school graduation. No — fate.

Rule Number One of fortune-telling: find out what makes them tick.

Take Mama Omida, for example. She's not actually Romanian. It took her a while to tell you this. Three weeks of shrugging off questions about Dracula and the Black Sea, and finally it spilled out on a stifling afternoon in her tent. She swore you to secrecy, gripped your shoulders tight enough to leave crescent-moon marks.

Her mother was Austrian and her father was an alcoholic Welshman (with perhaps

some English and Irish in him, too). "A mutt," she grunted in the accent you're now unpicking as a mixture of German and Hollywood-style Spanish.

Mama Omida. Caterpillar Mother. Did no one ever guess?

She rolls her eyes. "Canadians are too polite to ask."

So you practice lines, put on accents. Feel your tongue curve in new directions, sliming behind your teeth like a slug.

I sense that you hide a secret desire from the world.

Have you grown apart from a once-loved friend?

I can tell that you feel insecure around others sometimes.

I believe that something keeps you awake at night.

You watch Mama ask these questions, watch people unfold under her wise, all-seeing gaze.

She scores you a long swath of silky fabric from the clothing vendor. It's going to make you look exotic; monk-like. She winds and winds the fabric around your shoulders until it feels like you've been swallowed. You spin carefully, legs bound, feet shuffling, sweating, contained.

She tells you that you look the part.

Rule Number Two of fortune-telling: client retention is the backbone of this business.

By now, you've met her regulars. The lady with pancake makeup and a variety of animal-print outfits — she followed Mama from here to Hope to her winter station in California. The old woman with constant watery eyes who speaks only in whispers. The

hairless man, short of breath, patches of skin discoloured from chemo. He stares at you with meaningful intensity and you realize, slowly, that he thinks you're cancerous too. You run a hand over your bare scalp and excuse yourself.

"Never be afraid to tell them to come back," Mama says emphatically. "They *need* us. We are guiding their souls. They would be so very lost otherwise."

That's Mama's most repeated statement, although she has others, too. You learn that you'll attract double the clients when it's sunny, because rain drives people to stay inside, stewing their problems inside their own poor heads. You learn that hot tea is nature's own truth serum, and if you serve it lukewarm (like you accidentally did once), the whole process will be ruined. You learn that everyone, from billionaires to small children to the Dalai Lama, has something they regret. And if you can't discover what it is, you're not working hard enough.

You watch Mama at work. "I am so happy you came to see me today, Rena." She touches the animal-print woman's hands. "I knew you would patch things up with your sister. I feel strongly that she will be telephoning you within the week, wanting to talk again, wanting to plan an outing together. And I can sense — yes, I can feel it still — " She takes a long inhale and closes her eyes. "Your mother's presence, the bird in the tea leaves. The goodwill rushing in to welcome you, applaud you, nestle warm in your heart."

You watch Rena's eyes glimmer as she clutches Mama's hands and says, "Thank you."

You wonder how it feels to be looked at with such doggish gratitude.

"Of course, Rena." Mama smiles benevolently. "Best wishes for the future. I know I

will see you again."

She says this at the end of everyone's sessions.

Rule Number Three of fortune-telling: when in doubt, look towards the positive.

Soon it's your turn to lead a session. Your hands are shaking so badly that you miss the cup, sending hot water from the \$14.99 Mountain Equipment Co-op kettle (artfully dilapidated to look antique) dangerously close to your client's kneecap.

You pretend you didn't notice. Mama's sitting outside the tent listening, and you can picture the way her face will contort if she hears the word *sorry*.

Your client doesn't appear to notice, either. In fact, he doesn't seem to notice much of anything. He's staring at the ground with an unfixed, foggy expression, and when he meets your eyes, it doesn't change.

You can make an educated guess into what's bothering him; he made a mumbling reference to needing a Prozac to get through the session. And he's got that look — the burnt-out gaze of someone who's been through a round of the school psychologist's questions.

Not that you'd know, of course.

"I sense . . ." You deepen your voice. "I sense that something is troubling you."

He nods indifferently. "Yeah."

"Something overwhelming."

He shrugs.

"I feel that you constantly wish for a chance to relive the past, agonizing over all

your mistakes at night when you're supposed to be sleeping. That you fixate on the bad moments, that you yearn for a chance to redo your childhood. That you don't understand your parents, and they don't attempt to understand you. That you're — you're very unhappy."

Now he looks up, eyes slightly wider. Shit. Too harsh? Too soon?

He says, "I suppose some of that's true." Now he's giving you a searching gaze that makes you squirm inside your silky layers.

"Well." You direct his eyes downward to the cup. "Let's see what we have here." He hasn't finished drinking yet, so you take the liberty of pouring the excess water onto a grassy patch. Oh, if Mama could see you now.

You dump the dregs onto a saucer, squinting in what feels like a wise manner. It's a soggy mess — the leaves haven't unfolded as much as they did in your practice — and you begin searching for anything half-resembling a sun or dove or bridge, your panic slowly rising.

Your client's staring at the saucer as well. His brow is furrowed. He can't see anything either.

There's one particularly ruffled leaf at the edge of the cup. You seize the opportunity.

"Oh, look. A yew tree."

He narrows his eyes. "That's a tree?"

"Yes. A yew tree. The symbol of longevity. You're going to persevere, live for a long time with, um . . . great strength."

He stares.

"Yew trees are very hardy," you add helpfully.

"Okay."

His face has settled back into its former vacancy. You know what he's thinking.

You're just another drone.

On the contrary, Mama is impressed. After your client departs, she commends you on *infusing positivity* (her words) into the session. Half of you feels flushed and pleased. You'll get more clients after this. You just need to remember to tell them to come back again.

Rule Number Four of fortune-telling: learn to spot the non-believers.

You've become good at reading people over the weeks. You learn to tell the criers from the tough-lovers; the people craving a blunt wake-up call, the ones who want a gentle touch. But then, there are always surprises.

One scorching Saturday you meet a businessman, mid-40s. He wears Dolce & Gabbana sunglasses. He is not impressed by your exotic robe.

"First things first — I'm not a big fan of fortune-telling." He fixes you with the eye contact of a cougar. "But my wife's superstitious, and thinks I should get as many opinions as possible. It was either this or waiting in the carousel lineup with the kids."

You nod, feeling the dryness of your mouth, and pray that Mama's not standing outside for this one.

He sips his tea and makes a face. "I'm considering entering into a real estate investment with a friend. Development of condos on the eastside. Could be a good five-

ten years before we see a profit, but if the market increases, we could be rolling in gold in the future." Another grimace. "Hey, kid, got any sugar?"

You shake your head. "Uh, this is the authentic way."

He snorts, like you've said something funny. "Well, what can you tell me about market trends?" Now it looks like the cougar's spotted dinner, licking his chops happily, going in for the kill. "The sales-to-active-listings ratio? Benchmark price increases?"

Sweat is beading down your neck. "If I could just put the tea leaves onto the saucer, we can see what kind of sign —"

He raises an eyebrow. "Don't think I can finish this stuff. Too bitter. Besides, you're clairvoyant, right? Can't you just, y'know—" He shuts his eyes, wiggles his fingers. "Peek into the future and tell me?"

You stare back open-mouthed. Then the tent flap ruffles.

Mama's striding in. Oh, Jesus. She's overheard.

"Hello, sir." The thickest faux-Romanian purr you've ever heard. "I see you've been conversing with our novice. However, I felt such a strong presence within my tent that I was drawn to come in." She gives you a sidelong glance that clearly says *get out*.

Before you can move, your client interjects.

"Stop the show." His tone sours Mama's saccharine expression. "There's an adult behind all this? I thought these were just high-schoolers scamming cash. What kind of operation do you think you're running here?"

"Pardon me?" she snaps, a little less Romanian this time.

"This whole facade." He gestures around the tent with disgust. "This kid—" He points at you. "Should be out in the real world, kissing strangers, getting sick on the roller

coaster. Not regurgitating some money-sucking bullshit." He turns to you. "You making at least minimum wage, right? Christ."

Before you can answer, Mama cuts you off.

"I forsee a dark future for you," she hisses at him. "One that involves a harassment lawsuit."

"All right, all right." He holds up his hands in mock surrender. "I'm done here. " He brushes past her, back to the glittering fairgrounds. He doesn't leave cash.

After a moment, Mama turns to you.

She says in a dangerously quiet voice, "Have you been questioning my employment standards?"

"What? No. Of course not." You haven't. Even though you've never received a full paycheck, as you're still paying off the cost of your robe. You weren't aware you owed her for that.

"Listen to me, child." She's seething. "I gave you a job here because I saw something in you. I felt it in you — the gift of foresight. Do you think you'd be able to use it elsewhere?" A short laugh. "Try telling fortunes on Granville Street without the tent, the china, my name."

"I didn't say anything." You feel like crying. "I promise."

She sighs and kneels down beside you.

"I suppose I have no choice but to believe you. I can't think of one of my kind turning against me. We need to stick together." Her eyes are so withered-looking up close, ringed with shadows. "It is a hard world for people like us, the different ones. Others just don't understand."

You say softly, "I know."

She pats your knee, and then rises. "However, you did not get payment from that man. I am a kind woman; I will only deduct half his fare from your pay. Of course, you will need to replace the tea you wasted on him."

This is why you wind up scouring the streets of Chinatown, ducking around tourists, seeking out the perfect, slender leaves of *pouchong* tea. A bag costs \$8.75 per 50 grams; you pay in grummy coins, 60 cents short. The clerk takes pity on you and spots you the change.

After, you ride the Skytrain back and forth until the last 2 A.M. route, staring out the window at the hemlocks near 29th Avenue, the pines dotting New Westminster, the black-walled cave of Granville Station. The car shoots out beneath the sky and back inside. Again. And over again.

All of the rules boil down to: play off fear of the unknown.

Fear over life, death, debt, riches, fathers, mothers, siblings, lovers, travel, stasis. The future and all its innumerable possibilities. Fair enough. That vastness makes you feel nauseous. You see it seep out of the people in front of you, their minds soiled with choices, consumed with slow-rotting opportunities, desperately seeking one path, one patch of solid ground to set their sights on.

What if you told them something frightening? No, I don't sense your dead dog's presence. No, your wife isn't going to call off the divorce. No, you won't get that promotion — you're barely selling your own toupee.

Would they break down? Laugh? Get so offended they'd vow to prove you wrong?

You could try. Become the honest seer.

Mama goes for dinner at the fairground's White Spot, where she lingers over Triple-O burgers and gossip with the pottery vendors. This means she trusts you again. You're left to watch the Ferris Wheel rotating in the distance.

A young woman peeks through the tent flap. Her hair's yellow-blond and dark at the roots. Her arms are thin, but her belly is bulging. She's carrying a Hellevator-sized soft drink.

"You free?" she asks uncertainly.

You nod.

Pouring water from the kettle, you watch her. She seems nervous, nibbling on the drink's plastic straw, stopping embarrassedly when you hand her the teacup.

"What have you come seeking?" You're a master at intros now, and your accent has settled into something passably Norwegian.

She gestures down to her stomach and gives you a shrug. "I guess I just wanna know that my baby's gonna be okay."

"Of course. I sense that you have concerns?" You watch her sip her tea. Mama would be gearing up to see a spade of good fortune in those dregs.

"I guess you could say that. See, I'm doing everything I can for this baby. Taking overtime at the Shell until my mat leave. Moved back into my mom's basement so she can help out. I started putting away for a college fund." She smiles and blows on her cup.

You nod.

"But" Now she gnaws at her lip. "Sometimes I think there's only so much I can do. It — the baby, I mean — its dad wasn't the greatest. Isn't the greatest. He's still around, but he won't come near me anymore. Not now. I won't let him."

You picture the tiny limbs inside her, growing millimetres each day. How it would feel to be nestled so fully inside a cocoon.

She shifts to whispered urgency. "I'm afraid that even if I do everything I can, the baby will still somehow get messed up. I mean, it's half him. Half . . . rotten. But maybe if I try real hard and raise it right . . . I just want to know if it's possible."

You start to speak, but falter.

You want to say: this is out of my league; please find an appropriate religious deity.

You want to say: maybe it'll grow up to be the next Prime Minister. Just keep on keepin' on.

You want to say: perhaps, despite all your efforts, it will grow up and run away from home. Learn to sleep on a yoga mat and become the epicentre of a floor ringed with flea powder, while the building's resident drug dealer blasts reggae that sends asbestos quivering through the floorboards. Perhaps it will teach itself to stab open Campbell's soup with a bread knife, tomato-stained walls the alternative to stealing a can opener. Perhaps it will slip deftly, swiftly away from all authorities — ambulance attendants, even the transit police — until it realizes that no one is looking for it, no keening sirens are sounding each night on the six-o'clock news. Perhaps that's its *destiny*.

Her body is tense, arms wrapped protectively over her belly.

You say, "You will raise a happy, healthy child."

Your voice cracks like the ice cubes in her Coke.

Her posture relaxes. She smiles, slips a ten-dollar bill into the jar and exits, leaving the tent flap open to reveal the evening sun.

This week has been unseasonably warm. Untrustworthy. The tent frames your view of kids, candy-smeared and giddy in summer bliss stretched into September. Contortionists tugging at the glitter on their eyelids, the Pop Gun boys rushing by with cheap beer smuggled under their T-shirts.

And against the tent curtain, a moth sags in the heat. Its powdery wings make only the smallest, careful movements. You think it knows its place. The surety of rain. The strange impermanence of flight.

DIRECTIONS FOR GRAVEDIGGERS

East, west, south. *Dōng, xī, nán*. Through the window are the mountains, snow-capped peaks of Cypress and Grouse signifying north, and she should be sleeping with them at her back. She'd move the bed, but she knows her own strength. Eighty-one-year-old Li Fei: limbs stringy and malleable, mind taut and stubborn.

She listens to the sound of water dripping. A leak falls from the roof into a Tupperware container when it rains, and it rains often here. Water's bad in a bedroom and especially above the head. Another cog in a long line of problems: stained linoleum, sterile air, the smell of antiseptic and microwaved meat.

The bed across from her is the same as always, the white sheet over a prone figure, somebody in there unspeaking and unmoving. Sometimes she hears the caretakers call him Marty, ask him if he misses Dunoon.

Fei slinks across the room. She knows she can't make a fist without shaking. She knows Marty is shallow and silent but that there's a chance she can awaken some old Scottish strength. She knows there's a prohibition on physical exertion — just look in the hallway, the big banner, *don't bend without a buddy* — but Fei's always been terrible at following instructions. She's good at getting men to break rules. She'll use the old tricks of girlhood: try first with a smile and then pinch him hard if necessary.

She looks at Marty but her hope fades. He's so small against the sheets, splayed out like the bones of salt fish on a china plate. He could be dreaming. Fei lifts a finger to his cheek.

"Good morning," comes a voice from behind her.

Now it's all business. A tall woman in powder-blue uniform pushes a cart into the room, the cutlery clattering. "Back into bed, now, it's time for breakfast."

"I'm not hungry," says Fei.

"Let's not do this again," says Powder Blue, and she's guiding Fei's arms and legs and torso from behind, and she's so tall and strong that it's unfair, and Fei is weaker than she remembers.

Bland porridge goes into her mouth. The paste clings to her epiglottis.

"No," she says, but the spoon comes again, metal against her teeth. Fei feels oatmeal on her chin.

Powder Blue dabs her face, but Fei moves away.

"I want a new room," she says.

Powder Blue only sighs. "Oh, dear. Why don't you try to get some more rest, now? Your granddaughter is coming to visit today."

A prescription of rest after three months spent in a home designed for resting, eponymously. Fei calls these type of people *mùtourén*, wood-headed. "You are a moron," she replies crisply, enjoying Powder Blue's look of exasperation, watching with satisfaction as she exits the room.

She reaches for the napkin to wipe her face, but her hand struggles to grasp it. She opens and closes, opens and closes the mottled skin, and for a moment she feels afraid. She stares at her hand until the colours soften together. The sound of the rain calms her. It's still the same heaviness, the same *plunk* into the plastic, the same pounding on the roof.

"What's the matter, *nǎinai*? Don't you like it?"

Charlotte is soft and intentionally bronzed. A layer of puppy fat hugs her bones. Her breasts are teenage, orb-like, prominently displayed. A deliberate embarrassment.

"It's going to get cold," she says, nudging the Starbucks cup into Fei's hand.

Fei sniffs at the cup, makes a face and drops it.

Coffee, tart-smelling, spills over the linoleum. Fei feels the warmth seep into her silk slippers. In the background she hears *sorry, I'm sorry, google, one study, caffeine, you know, try to slow down the onset.*

Now the caretaker with sharp, lacquered nails is nodding. "Don't worry about it, honey." Claw Nails bends to remove Fei's slippers, and looks up. "What was the matter with it?" Slowly, as though Fei is dumb or hard of hearing.

"Smelled like shit," Fei replies. Perfect enunciation, soaring frication over the *sh*.

It works. Claw Nails and Charlotte are then quiet.

In the absence of conversation, Fei can look her over. It's over-pronounced, Charlotte's emerging womanhood, bulging out everywhere. Fei is not as senseless as they think. She still remembers her own teenage years, scraping pots for the last of paltry suppers, hurrying past wage riots, raising her skirt hem to show a touch — *a mere three centimetres, Charlotte* — more leg, the fresh air of rebellion on her calves. The white men would call out *geisha* when she was wearing a Mandarin *quipao*, even after she cuffed the sleeves to look more Western. And now here is Charlotte, half-naked, really; Fei can't

imagine the profusion of catcalls she receives.

"I cannot believe your father allows you out of the house wearing that," Fei says. "Do you not own a sweater?"

Charlotte only shrugs her shoulders. "I can choose my own clothes, *nǎinai*."

Charlotte lives in a house with stained glass windows and violin lessons and a robot-brain vacuum that sucks dirt autonomously. Its décor is informed by Sears catalogues rather than almanacs. Fei can't stand it there, in its bloated grandeur; she takes comfort in the starkness of her past. "My father paid a tax for each of our heads to belong here. A cent for every single hair," she once hissed over their hot dogs. "And now you eat only this *shǐ dàn*, this dog food?"

Fei's son visits her infrequently; his sharp-eyed wife has joined him on a grand total of one occasion. Yet Charlotte keeps coming, as predictable as the rain. Rarely asking questions, always with that searching look, like she's trying to catalogue this place, canvass Fei's anger. It is odd, Fei thinks, to see a girl who wants for nothing and still looks hungry.

East, west, south. *Dōng, xī, nán*. Drip, drip, drip. At night Fei tallies directions and raindrops. She sinks into her body and permits it to ache. It feels like she's been stuffed down and laced into ill-fitting skin. Through the halls there's coughing and snoring and the staccato of heart monitors, smells seeping from catheters, the moaning of a woman in nightmare.

This is surely the worst room of all the rooms she's ever slept in. She can

remember them all: her former apartment, the master bedroom she once shared with a husband, the first room of her own off Hastings St., and back further to the row housing of Canton Alley. Brick and mortar of her childhood. West of Carrall St., down the cobblestone and past the big iron gate, stood the tenements. Five buildings high and narrow, a railroad nearby with spilled coal that the children would play with. Fei wanted to follow the tracks longer, trace the hot steel like a cartographer until she understood Vancouver and its immensity, its sudden hostilities. Instead, she came home with blackened hands and her mother sighed *bù xíng*.

This home was narrow and cramped. They stored winter coats with jarred preserves and hung wet sheets to dry on the fire escape. But it had an order to its collision, after the visit especially.

That was the time her mother brought a stranger into the house. He spoke Mandarin with a firmer accent than theirs, and he spread calendars and a compass across their small table. He was a *fengshuǐ xiānshēn*, a geomancer from the banks of the Xi Jiang river, and so was his father and his father's father too.

He touched their doorways, asked birthdates, calculated distances to water. Fei's mother steamed pork belly *bao* and braised mustard greens and steeped tea, and her father talked quietly and intently with this man from a tiny village Fei had never set foot in. She listened to them talk of China and liberation, wars and new cities, and places — directions for rooms, directions for graves.

A clear view of running water.

Hills nearby, with little wind.

A burial on the twenty-first day of the month.

It scared Fei to hear her parents talk of their deaths so calmly, like the placement of their corpses was tomorrow's supper. She pulled at her father's elbow.

"Don't worry," he hushed her. "This is helpful for you, too." Yes, she knew, they'd told her before, the old story of how people like Dr. Sun Yat-Sen came to be so successful. It all stemmed from the orientation of his mother's grave — so perfectly plotted, placed just so.

"Now you, *xiǎojiě*," the geomancer said, and he bent down to her level. "What is your birthdate?"

She told him and he scratched down a calculation. "Now, you are in a good place," he told her. "The wealth of the mountains at your head and water so close, but around the corner. If the sea was at your feet it would be simply too strong, too much *qi* for such a little girl. But a short way's away; this is good."

"Too strong for me?" Even as a child, Fei had no patience for weakness. The geomancer laughed.

"You underestimate the power of *shuǐ*," he told her. "Water springs all life, forms all things. Let it shower its prosperity around you when it will, but do not look to it for solidity. Let the mountains be that for you instead."

After that, Fei slept with the strength of the mountains at her back, always, in Canton Alley until the tenements closed and were demolished, and in the sparse room off Hastings St., and in the master bedroom with her husband, and in the apartment that used to be her own.

Now she is folded tightly into sheets and feels small again. Mollified by adults but ignored in conversation, like a child. Tomorrow she'll watch their eyes roll back while

she complains of the room and the food and the leak, as usual.

They will never believe her suspicions about the night cleaner, either. Over eighty-one years she has always been inscrutably careful with her money. She's stayed up to try to catch him again. He's a rat-faced eighteen-year-old with headphones strung round his neck, dragging a mop and tub of water through the doorway.

She pretends to be asleep but watches Rat Face survey the room, look over silent Marty. He runs a hand across her dresser, collects the dust against his palm and shakes it into his garbage bag. He nudges a vase and doesn't bother returning it to its original position. His eyes linger on her embossed coin-purse.

Rat Face reaches his arm out. Fei feels a hot anger pulse through her.

"*Zázhǒng!*" she bellows. "Bastard! Thief!"

The boy yelps and moves back, knocking over his bucket. Bleach-laced puddles spread wide. Even after Rat Face scurries away, Fei can't stop yelling. She yells and yells, in Mandarin and English and something more primal, until all the lights flicker on. By then, even Marty raises his head.

"Perhaps, perhaps. A type of early-onset dementia would cause confusion. The loss of independence in no longer being able to physically care for oneself can lead to hostility, withdrawal, depression, even aggression."

It's said softly, as though Dr. Wu thinks Fei can't hear her.

"We can look at adjusting her current dose of corticosteroids. Mood swings are a potential side effect. It would also be beneficial if you'd talk to her about it. See if she'll

tell you what's the matter."

"I hope so." That voice, sounding as defeated as the day he was kicked off the grade-eight hockey team. It can only be Ming-húa.

Fei digs her elbows into the mattress and sits up to look at him. There he is, returning her gaze with something like unease — the same eyes as her own, the same cheekbones. His hair is thinner than she remembers. Now a fresh irritation. He hasn't visited since last month.

"*Mǔqīn*," he begins hesitantly in Mandarin. "*Please . . . do not be alarm. Alarmed.*" His accent is awful. Tripping pitifully over the falling tone.

"Alarmed?" Fei replies in English.

"Good morning, Mrs. Li," Dr. Wu intercepts. "You gave one of our staff members quite a fright last night. Perhaps you might discuss your feelings of unease with us."

"Your staff member is a thief," Fei says.

"I assure you, we take this complaint seriously." Dr. Wu said these same lines the last time. "We conduct criminal record checks on all of our employees, and we searched this staff member last night, but there was no evidence of stolen goods. He was adamant that he was moving your purse only to dust underneath. Mrs. Li, I understand your confusion, but is there anything else that's bothering you? We all want to ensure you're comfortable."

Fei sighs. "Move my bed. Give me a jar of dried *suan zao ren* for my weakness."

"I'm sorry," says Dr. Wu gently. "Our rooms are organized to building code and fire regulations, and herbal medications can interfere with your current dosage."

Fei looks back to Ming-húa. "Take me back to my apartment."

He coughs. "Mother," he says. "I know this has been difficult for you, but we have to ensure you're safe. It's too dangerous for you to live alone. Don't you remember your broken shoulder? What if you hadn't been found in time? Here, there are people all around to help you. They're here *just* to help. You need to accept them."

He looks at the doctor, as though seeking confirmation. She nods.

"And you'd rather pay strangers than take care of me yourself," says Fei, and she feels the anger surge again. She wonders where Dr. Wu's parents are, if she's left them rotting amongst a swell of nurses, if she takes their pulses with precision and then exits, firmly shutting the door.

"They can do better than I can." Ming-húa speaks to the floor. "This is the right place."

"*Méiyǒu*," Fei says, shaking her head. Both Ming-húa and the doctor look at her now, and she wonders if either of them understand her.

The next day Fei awakens to voices and metal squeaking. Marty is being wheeled out of the room. She smells Lysol atop a sour scent, and her body threatens vomit but she swallows it down. They've drawn a partition so Fei watches their shadows pluck things from him: pyjamas, compression socks, a ring off a finger. The stretcher departs and the bed remains. It's the same quiet but the silence turns tangible; she feels embalmed in it, the room thick with the loss of some comfort she cannot name. Outside, it starts raining.

Fei eats lukewarm meatloaf and water and her evening pills. She watches *Dancing with the Stars* with the group until their commentary becomes too irritating. An aid takes her vitals and helps her into her nightgown. She lies tight in the sheets until the clock hits midnight.

Fei's parents taught her to burn *joss* paper, spirit money, after a death. Fei's English school taught her to buy flowers. If she could, she'd do both. She thinks Marty would appreciate it.

Drip, drip, drip. The pace of the water leak increases.

She never chose the placement of her grave. It's an archaic custom now, the wielding of a compass, plotting ancestral compatibility and the correct direction for a body to face. Still, Fei had carried out her parents' wishes. She gave instructions to the man at Mountain View Cemetery when her mother, trembling with something — grief, the wobbly English syllables refusing to form — couldn't. Later, she followed a creased piece of paper and directed the gravediggers to slice the earth just so, carve a spot for her mother's coffin beside her father's. Under this control, the weight of that wooden box became somewhat lighter.

Now Fei pictures the burial process. Big hole in the ground, spread-over dirt. She thinks of the time ahead, her body's slow unraveling into something alien. She looks across to the empty bed until the air is so thick she can't breathe.

But instead of suffocating, she sits up.

Fei rises out of bed — she's slow but all of this feels natural, necessary, intended — and walks to the door. Across the hall, there's the man with his Subway sandwich and

black-and-white surveillance cameras. He doesn't look up when she pads down the hall.

It's thirty steps to the glass doors, past the reception desk and the emergency defibrillator. She pulls at the door but it won't budge, it's locked, her fingernails scratch the glass —

"Hey!"

Fei turns to see Rat Face, his hands clenched around Windex and paper towel.

"What the hell?" he says. Yet he takes a step backward. She scares him.

"Unlock this door," she whispers.

He doesn't move.

"I'll tell everyone you steal. Again."

He stiffens. "They don't believe you."

She reaches out and pinches him, hard. She pinches his nipples and he whimpers. She pinches again, grabbing the tender flesh of his stomach and his arms and his nose, as high as she can reach. His arms flail, but he doesn't hit her.

"You're fucking crazy," he gasps.

"Open it."

He fumbles with the lock, then takes off down the hall.

And, suddenly, she's outside.

Into the parking lot, through a clump of trees, and it's wet. No umbrella, no slicker; she can't remember a time she let the rain permeate so willingly. She breathes in everything earthy, feels the water stream onto her skin.

Li Fei: nightgown soaked, slippers mud-stained, smiling at herself for the first time in months. There's a streetlight and a siren somewhere behind her, but those are no

concern to her anymore. In a dark sky she finds the north, Grouse Mountain with lights strung on its peak. Then she moves forward, searching.

No trees nearby; their roots can wind interferingly.

Green grass growing all around.

Ground undulating.

She finds it; the right place.

Fei brushes back leaves with her hands and angles her spine against the earth. Supine, staring upward, she feels small again, but a different sort. The streetlamps turn raindrops illuminated, phosphorescent. Upwards is an endless spread of stars. At her back, the mountains. *Dōng, xī, nán*. She shuts her eyes. All around her, water.

INDICARRA LOVE

Indicarra was a town shaped like a question mark and Indicarra Love was born shaped like one too. "Don't you ever hate the place you came out of," said her mother, and so Indicarra Love grew up scrunched-up, like she didn't know how to reconcile the things she loved and the things she hated, and at her feet was that broken-off dot. Like the start of an ellipsis, or a piece of the things she was always leaving behind.

Around age nine, it became clear that Indicarra Love's body was growing jinxed. Her spine curved with a magnitude that was less human and more humpback whale, like the ones that lived off the coast of their country. Indicarra Love knew this because her mother's ex-boyfriend once took her mother (without Indicarra Love) there, over the mountains, and Mary came back with a stuffed humpback to make up for it. Its back was decorated with a little Canadian flag.

Indicarra Love's back brace was not decorated.

"Ugly ducklings turn into swans, if you eat your green beans," Mary told her.

When Indicarra Love idled at the tip of Indicarra, now, about to drive her way down its outline, she was a mystery. A man pumping gas next to her asked, friendly, "Coming or going?" and her side-view mirror told him nothing; whether she was hunched-up or straight, if she'd just arrived or been there always, static, waiting.

Indicarra was a question mark because its one central road curved around its suburb in a semicircle, hugging the narrow houses and the gas station, the strip mall, the microcosm

of yellow fluorescent lights. The rest of the road went straight through the outskirts, trees hiding diesel trucks or trailer parks, and then stopped. Stopped short. It stopped at the mouth of the woods and evergreens shaded the big circle, the lake. The lake was tangled and silty, filled with pungent weeds, and nothing liked it except the frogs. "This town has a frog problem," announced its mayor when their population grew too mighty. She said it with some hesitance, like she was expecting people to laugh, like something so small couldn't possibly be big. The frogs hated loneliness. Every night Indicarra Love fell asleep to the sound of their bellies croaking together in the blackness.

At age nine Indicarra Love's spine began bending and her mind began understanding more, too. "You live *here*," said Kimmy Ralph, who lived in a suburban rancher that honestly, Indicarra Love had confirmed the week prior, looked almost identical except it was fixed firmly to the ground.

Indicarra Love shrugged, playing cool. "It's close to the lake. We can ride bikes there, if you wanna." Because she was curved, she could actually go faster on a bike than the others.

But when she took Kimmy inside, she saw her home differently. She saw the way Kimmy's eyes took in the yellow ceiling, the tacky wallpaper, the row of porcelain cats. "Doesn't have a bathtub," Kimmy said suspiciously. Indicarra Love made cinnamon-sugar toast and Sunny D, which shut Kimmy up.

Soon the trailer-park kids learned to sit at the back of the bus and the suburban kids at the front. Anyone could have seen this segregation coming; there was only one

school, after all, and the bus picked up the outskirts first. The suburban kids were snotty until high school, when the back of the bus became cool. Suddenly they were grunge incarnate, hard as B.I.G. before he died, *notorious*.

They could scare their teachers, especially substitutes, the out-of-towners who heard rumours about Albertan hillbilly rage and came in shaking. Mr. Parker was one of those. He called out, "Indicarra Love?" and then came the usual snickers for hunchback-trash-fatherless-greasy-haired girl. "Hey, hey," Mr. Parker said, quivery. "That's a beautiful name." And laughter.

But Indicarra Love felt full of sunshine. It didn't matter that he'd pronounced it wrong, stressing the *di* instead of the *arr*. Nobody, except her mother, said her name with such lightness. The next day, after the classroom emptied, she shoved a pickle jar with a hundred glinting pennies onto Mr. Parker's desk. The prized bounty of her thirteen-year-old life, and she wanted to leave it there. Three years later and she'd think back on this with rage.

There was the ballet teacher who called her "I" for the sake of easiness. Indicarra Love was six and it was a community program. Mary needed her next paycheque to purchase the leotard, so Indicarra Love danced in her socks and green Day-Glo leggings for the first three classes. "I," she sensed the other girls felt, was something else, although they did not yet have the vocabulary to articulate it.

The mayor of Indicarra organized a frog-slaughter. She called it an *environmental remediation*, but everyone knew what she really meant. They needed to show the town was self-sustaining, capable of controlling its wildness. Municipal volunteers bought rubber boots from the strip mall's Dollarama. They marched out to the lake in their slickers, holding plastic nets and polka-dot buckets, as solemn as soldiers going to war.

When they first visited the spine surgeon in Calgary, Indicarra Love's world broke open. Everything was so tall, so sparkling, so teeming with movement. The waiting room smelled like a Little Tree air freshener.

"Twelve years old," the doctor confirmed, a woman in white with expensive-looking hair. The first thing she asked Indicarra Love was, "Not menarchal?"

Indicarra Love just gaped. But her mother said, "Oh, you mean . . . no, not yet."

"Thankfully," said the doctor. She tapped the folder that held Indicarra Love's X-rays. "She should have seen an orthopedic specialist much earlier."

Indicarra Love didn't understand the terms, but knew the doctor's tone. "I had something like this growing up too," Mary said, "and I grew out of it. I seen it in her but figured it was the same, like baby teeth."

"You were lucky," said the doctor. "We'll have to get a brace fitted right away. Since her pelvis hasn't expanded fully — we'll hope she stays a late bloomer — we might be able to catch it without resorting to surgery, but cross your fingers. Your job doesn't provide insurance?"

"No," Mary said. "But the lady up front told me the government pays for most it,

and I can cover the rest."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." Her mother sounded angry, and Indicarra Love looked at her in surprise. It wasn't like her to be rude.

"All right. We'll schedule the fitting, and for now, let's run over some best practices. Proper nutrition, in conjunction with the brace, is vital for the growing spine. I have a sheet from Health Canada here detailing the recommended —"

"Listen," Mary said, "I know they probably tell you we're on assistance, but we still eat our veggies. I buy the big four-litre of milk a week. It's okay."

"No one tells me that," the doctor replied. "Your finances are completely confidential." Then she slid the piece of paper into her mother's hands. "Take it just in case. "

Indicarra Love had never seen her mother look so small and ugly.

Mary's tension broke when they disembarked their first bus and stood waiting for the other, their transport back into town. "Everything will be okay," she told Indicarra Love, and with each metre they moved closer to Indicarra, she seemed more confident about the statement.

Indicarra Love's mother ran away from the town when she was seventeen with Indicarra Love's father, who was a capital-M Mystery. He was known only by the forbiddance surrounding him, and from things Indicarra Love's mother would let slip. Once or twice a year she would get drunk and give little slivers: green eyes, lumberyard hands, bruises on

her stomach where it wouldn't show. On these nights she would crawl into Indicarra Love's bed and hold her like she was a little kid, even at nine, twelve, fifteen. "I came back where I belonged," her mother would say, and Indicarra Love believed her.

When Indicarra Love started bending, she rode her bike over to Big Al's Pick-a-Part with big ideas. The Pick-a-Part was a gold mine of gutted-out cars, street signs, lamps, engine segments and just *stuff*, all glittering in the sunlight.

Indicarra Love sifted through bolt heads and wilted cowboy hats, and Big Al spotted her. "Hey there, little missus!" he said. He looked like God atop a tin chariot, white-bearded and grinning.

"Mary's kid, eh?" he confirmed, and she nodded. "Well, I thought you were a crouched-up chimpanzee!" He didn't say it meanly, so she laughed.

"You got an eye for beauty? Seen you pokin' around my stuff."

Indicarra Love shrugged. "I wanna find something perfect."

"Oh-ho-ho," he chuckled. "Good luck with that."

"Something to fix me," she said.

"Ah." He looked her over, and when he next spoke it was quieter. "I see. Well, you take a thing or two whenever you want. But only one at a time, okay? And when you realize it's not gonna be perfect, you do somethin' else with it. Got it?"

So every week Indicarra Love picked a new part, and at night she would stand in front of the mirror and try it out. Twist a wrench into her skin, tie a frayed cable round her belly; later, rub a crankshaft over her brace like she was ironing linen. Nothing

worked. When she went to doctor's appointments in the city, she would leave these things behind. Sometimes she could spot a technician picking one up, bewildered as they lifted a rusted valve cap or shard of side-view mirror, and it filled her with the purest kind of joy.

Now, Indicarra Love wrapped each porcelain cat carefully in newsprint and stacked them in cardboard boxes. "I'm doing good," her mother kept narrating, as she folded clothes neatly. "I'm doing okay." But Indicarra Love wondered. She placed pictures into boxes — family members she'd never met, photographed always in Indicarra. Her uncle at the same old school, her grandmother against the iced-over lake. "I named you for all of us," her mother told her once, and it made Indicarra Love feel inexplicably guilty.

Mr. Parker learned how to pronounce her name correctly, and he was made a full-time teacher. He stayed, even when someone hid a skunk shot through the belly in the classroom, even when Kirk stabbed Jaime T. in the throat with an HB pencil's sharp end. He kept Indicarra Love's pennies on his desk through grades eight to ten.

It was evident he knew that many of them weren't book-smart, cultured — *coastie-brained*, as her mother called it — and so his voice lost its shakiness, except when he tried to get all philosophical. Indicarra Love liked to cajole this side out of him. She learned how to ask the right questions.

"Mr. Parker, why do places need names?"

"Mr. Parker, what does it mean to be real?"

Once, she asked him what was the purpose of change, and he quoted quietly, "Oh, our bones are clothed with an amorous new body." Then came the groans. But Indicarra Love thought this was the most beautiful thing she'd ever heard. It gave her the bright, full feeling that, she realized later, her mother must've felt when she named her.

The rainslickers and nets were futile. Indicarra's gum-booted army discovered frogs were wily in the sunshine. To kill a frog properly, they learned, you had to go in at night. You had to shine a four D-cell flashlight into their eyes to blind them, and then you had to stab them with a trident through the spine. The process was called *gigging*, and over a number of weekends the volunteers became good at it. They realized the creatures were rendered immobile so easily, how rare the escape actually was.

"Do you wanna keep these?" Indicarra Love asked Mary, rifling through a stack of battered videotapes. "Who even owns a VCR anymore?"

"Pearl Gaffey down the road," her mother clucked, "*she* owns a VCR. Maybe I'll take 'em over."

Indicarra Love watched as Mary tossed the tapes into a bag, her hand ceasing on one and pulling it aside. Black, homemade, scrawled label. Mary tucked this into a box of some cellophaned spice jars without saying a word.

Indicarra Love knew what it held. The tape of the news segment, her mother with the others clustered in front of the lake, talking fast and nervously. Provincial

channel, Big-Deal publicity. The backdrop looked so small, foreign on a screen.

Not six months ago they'd gathered that night to review their shapes on TV — Pearl Gaffey had taped it for all of them, probably — and Indicarra Love had watched from someplace far away. "Everything's here," her mother had said when it was her turn, and looked wide-eyed into the camera like it could reply.

Indicarra Love remembered when the frogs died, because everything fell so quiet at night. She had trouble sleeping. It seemed like part of the town faltered: the Dollarama shut down, Big Al died, a bunch of evergreens got cancer.

Big Al's junkyard turned into their teenage Eden. They drank bottles of Canadian Club whiskey and climbed on abandoned school busses, which stood like giant whale bones. They made bonfires and burned mattresses, lawn chairs, tires. They danced atop the busses, made the old wheel-wells moan.

In the dark of these nights, Indicarra Love felt herself looking different to the boys. Some of them she hadn't grown up with, strangers from towns over, and they didn't see her weirdness. She was uncurling slowly, although she still wore her brace every day, covered up by a large sweatshirt.

One night she lay inside the bus, on a leather seat ripe with mold, clutching one of the new boys. They kissed until her lips hurt, and then his hands slid her shirt off and found the brace.

He considered it. "What is it?"

Indicarra Love didn't know what to say, so she said, "It keeps me in place."

Minutes ago he had rubbed the patches of his new, hopeful beard into her neck and told her he was going to fuck her so good she couldn't stand straight, and she had accepted it because she didn't anyway.

"Can I take it off?" he asked cautiously.

She nodded.

After, Indicarra Love put her clothes back on and left the brace behind, its plastic wobbling inside the bus, the floor punched through with roots and leaves. Oh, how her mother screamed when she found out Indicarra Love had lost it, had to get a new one fitted. But Indicarra Love liked the thought of the wilderness growing around it in there. It was something that said *look, I was here*.

Frogs or no frogs, budget forecast or no, it was going ahead. Indicarra was going to be fractured. The province would widen the highway into four lanes with a 30-foot-wide median strip. It would drive a clean line through the question mark, and the remains on either side would amalgamate. Towns would group together like spawn. The mayor attempted to claim an absorption of culture, but as the cameras swept suburban stucco and trailer overhangs, it took fifteen seconds for the TV to highlight their triteness.

It happened, Indicarra Love maintained, because they had nothing better to do. Mr. Parker spotted her and Kimmy Ralph cutting class. Kimmy wanted to be cool then, too, to be tough and ripped-jeaned, and it was a mutually beneficial relationship because

Kimmy had a car. They always discussed doing something hard, something *notorious* — setting fire to the town and screeching away. But when they skipped that day, they were smoking pot and lazing outside the mall, stirring Kimmy's dad's bourbon into their McFlurrys and dipping French fries in.

He saw her and she saw him. Her body in its slight telltale hunch, the joint and the empty bottle. Their eyes locked and then he drove away.

Why was he at the mall, she later wondered, after lunch on a school day? Maybe he'd followed her. The thought filled her with a kind of nauseous glee. Later, at the youth justice committee, she'd learn that he was picking up antibiotics for his young daughter, who had been sick and, since then, recovered splendidly.

Now, Indicarra Love shifted the clutch and pulled out of the park, passing the McLaughlins with their blue door, the same Christmas lights strung around Mrs. Cooper's despite the heat. It felt strange knowing this all would change soon; unreal, a false promise. She recalled the same feeling from standing, naked and goose-pimpled, in front of doctors as they tilted her body to indicate which way she would grow.

The day that Mr. Parker ratted her out she felt so curled-in, even though the X-rays said she was getting straighter and straighter every day.

They called her down to account for the skipped classes, and Indicarra Love said she was at doctor's appointment. A *specialist*. The secretary didn't even look up, just

typed it down. They had bigger troubles here. Three of her fellow students were pregnant already.

There was the sound of a book shutting, and Indicarra Love looked up to see Mr. Parker's eyes meeting hers.

"A doctor's appointment," he repeated.

"Yeah," she said, and looked meaningfully at Mr. Parker, knowing he wouldn't call her out. He'd sit her down in private, let her bleed out all her troubles and maybe do something sincere and mannish after, buy her a chocolate bar or a Coke, and he wouldn't really be mad.

But Mr. Parker did not do any of this.

"You're better than this," he told Indicarra Love, and his voice did not quiver.

She heard him tell the principal after. "Yeah, I spotted her," he'd said, and he'd sighed. Oh, that sigh. He let the principal give her detention and explain the particulars.

Better than this, she thought. What was *this*? One big question mark, Mr. Parker.

Kimmy and Indicarra Love managed to find Mr. Parker's address, and they sped down the dark highway with Kimmy's Cavalier and all their B.I.G. hardness built up. It was a nice house, before they arrived. They threw two dozen eggs and smashed windows with motley junk that Indicarra Love had collected over the years — scraps from the park, stuff pocketed from Big Al's. They painted his driveway, although they couldn't afford spray paint so they stole a can of something green from the school's maintenance closet and slopped it on with brushes. This was slow and ugly, the letters indecipherable. It was why they got caught.

"Stop right there!" Flashlights against their humped, crouched bodies.

A neighbour had called the cops. They cuffed the girls, and Indicarra Love realized her hands could reach further round her back than ever before. Kimmy was slimed with paint and already crying. "Sorry-sorry-sorry," she blubbered.

Indicarra Love didn't cry. She stood tightly as Mr. Parker's car pulled up to the driveway. He saw her and she saw him. There was the wide-mouthed shock she'd been waiting for.

He would come over. He would thump the car hood, yell *what's wrong with you?* and maybe shake her by her pinned-back shoulders, and then perhaps she would cry. But he didn't. He stood there talking to his neighbour, wringing his hands, and they took her away.

She sat in her handcuffs and thought *it isn't bad, it isn't bad, I can fix it.*

"Hey," she said to him outside the youth justice sector, but he kept walking. And he turned his face when she waved later, and when the probation officer said "Indicarra Love," he looked at the ground.

As a child, Indicarra Love heard her name over and over. It sounded like the frogs were croaking it out at night, and when her mother had a boyfriend, sometimes their bedsprings did too. *In-di-carr-a, in-di-carr-a.* Indicarra Love would dance ridiculously for the boyfriends, those old pirouettes. They taught her how to tilt the glass when pouring beer and how to hit BBs off Campbell's cans, but her mother won out at night. She hated the boyfriends then, and somewhere under that, hated her mother for being far away. Her mother was supposed to stay close, coiled around her like a

semicircle, so Indicarra Love could push her away on her own terms.

Mr. Parker didn't want to press charges. He didn't want her coming back to clean up her mess. The punishment was community service, no criminal record, and she had to write an apology and take some recreational therapy. So Indicarra Love signed up for a therapeutic movement class and wrote a long, hackneyed confession. *I'm sorry. Blah blah blah. I'm better than this.* It looked great on paper. It was printed so neatly. The probation officer was satisfied, but she knew in her sick little heart that it was not Indicarra Love, not the truth.

On the first day at the studio, the instructor told the class to imagine themselves as animals. Swans, graceful swallows. Andalusian horses. The young offenders swirled and stomped in sarcastic imitations. One student whinnied.

Indicarra Love thought of frogs, the grotesque angles of their bodies. She crouched down and sprang up, the brace digging into her hips. It was good for a laugh. She did it again. She sprang and then she spun, and imagined the swelling of their *ribbits*, spinning, spinning. "Okay, stop," the instructor said, but the momentum built until she couldn't. She spun and spun until she felt herself coming unhinged from inertia, apart from gravity, the whirling world stilled.

The school was already taped in yellow in preparation for the bulldozers. Indicarra Love couldn't believe how small it looked. She tried the door, and it opened. The halls were

bare, stripped of voices and posters and kids.

"Hello?" she called shakily when she reached the office. The same secretary, now boxing file folders, squinted at her.

"Can I help you? You shouldn't be in here." There was no recognition in her face.

"I was wondering . . . is Mr. Parker here?"

"Oh, no. When the news came in, he got himself a job somewhere in the city.

Already moved down. Can't blame him for getting out A-S-A-P."

"Okay." Indicarra Love felt herself slumping, and pulled upward. "Hey, can you give him a message for me?"

"Well, sure, I can send it along to his new address. You a former student? How come I don't remember you?"

Indicarra Love shrugged. "I look different, I guess. Hey, got a pen?"

She wrote, standing there long enough that the secretary went back to packing her boxes. It came out messy and honest, and Indicarra Love felt satisfied.

"Wait," she said, turning on her heel, "I almost forgot," and she signed her name.

When Indicarra Love was a child, she and her mother lived small enough to be contained wholly in the town. They rarely left it, didn't want for much. On the longest days of summer they'd lay out on the wharf, the lake bobbing beneath them. They'd slap mosquitos and tell each other stories. Origins.

"Let's say we were cowboys," said Mary, "and we rode and rode until we got to the river. Then we took off our saddles, and we tubed down the rapids on 'em."

"We were astronauts," said Indicarra Love, "and we para-shutted down the mountains. No, we were knights. Our suits made us all straight. We sounded like the fridge door when we walked. *Squeak-squeak, squeak-squeak.*"

"Okay, we were sailors," said Mary. "Our ship sunk in a terrible crash. But we hitched a ride on a big whale. It took us to our own island, where things were so warm and it never rained, and we stayed there forever and ate coconuts."

"No," said Indicarra Love.

"What, no coconuts?"

"No. Not *forever* there." Mary laughed, but Indicarra Love felt vaguely panicked, and her mother sensed it in the way a mother just could. So she rubbed her daughter's half-moon back and said, "Okay."

"No town," they'd told the mayor, "requires a road that simply *ends*." It was true, perhaps. The lake was their great punctuation; it put a halt to everything. The highway and the new municipality were forced to form around it. They planned to alter the river's downflow, manipulate its bends with braces and dams, but the lake would remain. Ancient and putrid and living, as always.

Indicarra Love drove back through the question mark with boxes rattling beside her. It felt strange to bring things with her, leaving no wake. Her life sat wrapped in sheets of newspaper. She'd brought a stack of these papers in from the city, saved from the date when they all bore the article, her name, her face.

A jolie-laide performance. The kind of avant-garde that is disconcertingly intriguing — all wildness, angles, fury.

Crouch, leap, spin.

And that name! Like a brand of drugstore perfume. A fitting perplexity.

Her amphibian two-step, her hunchback's ballet.

A think piece, they'd written, and it was. She scrunched up small and stretched out wide, and in her beautiful kind of ugliness they had to reconcile the things they loved and the things they hated. She left behind shapes in their minds. Like a broken-off piece of her, like the start of an ellipsis.

LAND OF LIVING SKIES

When they think of UFOs, they picture green-gelled aliens, silver saucers, sickly E.T. and his kid-friendly telepathy. Spindly-fingered time-travellers, faint distillations of Mr. Spock and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Saskatchewan is here to teach them otherwise.

The province is home to the highest number of Canadian crop circles per capita. Saskatchewan, its name snatched from Cree, eight syllables for *swift-flowing river* whittled down, still finds itself best known for wheat. The circles found in these fields are difficult for them to digest — but, really, there are signs of us in everything. Their reality tilts with this new knowledge. Sunset scores flat earth and creates the illusion of red craters, firebeds of wheat-boughs, the prairie awash in hemorrhaged gravity. Even the everyday becomes suspect. Every license plate, lining roads from Moose Jaw to Saskatoon, bears the same inscription — *land of living skies*.

It happens when Mary-Beth is testing the soil. It's a Tuesday evening under the ruddy sky; she takes the earth's temperature between slender reeds of durum, nearly ready for harvest. All of a sudden, she's overcome with this strange feeling, like the first inklings of a sneeze. Like a stomach rumbling. Like something just under the surface, struggling to get out.

"Oh," Mary-Beth whispers. It's as though another thing is present, feasting on the freshness, despite the fact that she's alone in the middle of a farm in Branson, Saskatchewan.

"Hello?" she calls into the waving field. "Someone there?"

Cautiously, Mary-Beth walks forward, the wheat brushing her skin. She steps into a world of sudden flatness — stalks bent with perfect precision into uniformity, a circle goliath around her. It feels like all the air's been sucked down.

She shatters the thermometer running back, gasping towards the house, where David is seated in the kitchen with a can of Molson. "I saw — I saw —" She's bursting like a little girl, though she's twenty-five, married, mature by Branson standards.

But when David hears her story, he frowns, immediately opening the cupboard. There they are: the taut little bottles and the clear glass case with Sunday, Monday, all the rows in their permanence. Tuesday is still waiting for her.

"Really?" Mary-Beth says breathlessly. "You need to believe me."

David lifts his head skyward. "I just — I can't deal with this right before the harvest, Mary-Beth. Do you know how busy we're going to be soon?"

Mary-Beth bites her lip. David's staring up as though silently summoning his parents down the stairs, which is certainly not what she wants. But she bursts again. "It's just like what my uncle told me about when I was a kid, he used to describe them to me, I —"

"Mary-Beth, do you remember St. Joseph's? Do you remember how they had to bolt you to your own bed?"

Mary-Beth blushes. "I . . . no, that was different. I was sick then. I feel fine, I've been sleeping . . . David, please let me show you. I—I *felt* it all around me. There was something else there with me."

He walks with her, his flashlight following in the wake of her Hunter boots.

"Look!" she calls triumphantly when the circle appears, but David clamps his calloused hand around her mouth. "Quiet," he hisses. "If there is someone out here, I want to catch them. Remember those hoaxes?"

"What hoaxes?" Mary-Beth can barely pay attention, her gaze pinned to the circle. The farm stretches two hundred acres wide and she's used to running through the rows with the gleeful abandon that accompanies a real, true aloneness. Now, however, there's a distinct note of non-privacy.

"Those crop circles. Stupid kids were smart enough to wait until it rained, so the tracks of some two-by-four they used would be covered. Bunch of reporters came in, they interviewed the guy up in St. Gregor — that poor farmer. I felt sorry for him, getting laughed at afterwards. It was all over the news a few years ago, don't you remember?"

"I barely remember anything from a few years ago."

David looks upward again, sighing at the open sky. He snaps photos with his cell phone, swearing Mary-Beth to secrecy. "No gossip. I'll handle this." He fiddles a stalk. "The wheat's looking well ripe, at least."

Back in the kitchen, David loads cartridges into his hunting rifle, the sound metallic and hollow. He doesn't need to say it, but Mary-Beth knows the adage: *a man has a right to defend himself against intruders*, however invisible they may be. She swallows lithium, the pill bitter in her mouth.

Humans have invented delightfully unnecessary classifications for nearly everything, we've learned. Most appear convoluted — gender, race, this strange trend of shaping linguistic provisions into something called poetry. However, we do consider their

superstructure for survival a logical one. This *hierarchy of needs*; yes, this applies to all living forms. We have manipulated physics infinitesimal to the human eye to come here, seeking one such need — food, some luxurious sustenance — and have landed, like others before us, in Saskatchewan. Its strange plains of amber.

They are no stranger to our entrances. For this journey, we've decided to come up through the earth's molten core. When we place our bait in the sky, it tends to alarm them, but there seems to be a general welcoming of that which appears organic, that which comes from the ground. Just like their precious vegetables.

Of course, we are not guaranteed any privacy. One of them detects our presence quite quickly. Their language is primitive, but we can deduce that this human is branded Mary-Beth. A curious specimen, five feet tall and freckled, with two long braids down her back. Her head is perfectly oval-shaped, which adds to its intrigue.

We shall analyze our surroundings and see what crops up in this land of abundance, this fertile prairie ground. Our pop-culture sources suggest that its inhabitants are cripplingly polite, so we expect to go unbothered while we chart our opportunities.

Jesse Cohen carries business cards with his title in twelve-point Times New Roman: *ufologist*, as in Unidentified Flying Object, not Ultimate Frisbee Organization, a mistake his kid cousin made once and he's loath to forget. A journalist once called him *Canada's Fox Mulder* and, despite lacking Duchovny's jawline, the nickname has stuck. He is thirty-two years old and has never seen a UFO, but searches desperately and hungrily for stories, devouring accounts like Esso-station beef jerky.

Jesse's methodology is as much cross-examination as interpretation. People like to kid him, call in about alien corpses masquerading as mannequins in Cornwall Centre. When Mary's call comes in, the faux-calm of her voice betrays a certain hysteria. A good sign.

"I've waited a night," she whispers, "and they're still here."

"Where are you, miss?" Jesse asks, jotting down notes.

"Branson," she replies, "on the outskirts. My husband's family owns a wheat farm — we're just about ready for this year's crop. The circle came up, and I'm not supposed to tell anyone, but . . . well, I Googled and you seemed like such an expert."

"Just the one circle?" Jesse asks. "No sign of any others? Any movement, any figures?"

"No," Mary-Beth says. "I thought maybe I could tame one, like a fox. I put some food out. Coffee cake in a Tupperware. But nothing's touched it."

"Well, of course not," Jesse says. "Would *you* accept food from a foreign species?"

"Oh — no, I suppose not," Mary-Beth says.

"I'll need to come up immediately." Jesse's office is conveniently located within a Motor Coach RV, its insides plastered with intergalactic paraphernalia and fast-food wrappers and photographs of shadowy prairie suspects. "Listen, this isn't the first time we've gotten wind of a landing in this area. Surely you've heard the stories?"

"Yes," Mary-Beth says slowly, "when I was a little girl."

Jesse attempts a flat tone of professionalism, struggling to contain the excitement in his voice. "Listen, if your family members are suspicious, best to keep it between us

at this time. At least while I'm conducting preliminary research. I can be very discreet."

"All right. I'll speak with you when you arrive."

Jesse turns the keys, the RV's engine growling like a gastro-intestinal tract.

"Time to hit the rhubarb," he murmurs to himself, merging forward onto Highway 16 in the midday sun.

We watch them as they attempt to watch us. It's humorous, somewhat, seeing their brows furrow and nostrils flare. They stumble around; Mary-Beth points at the tracks we've neatly imprinted in the soil. The dark-haired man named Jesse takes careful measurements of the crop circle. They fail to consider that we may have gone non-molecular in hiding.

"Signs," Jesse sighs, staring out over the prairie. "They follow past patterns I've studied. The timing, the location, the wheat field. Perhaps they've returned to settle here. If only we could communicate, talk to just one of them . . ."

We can't help but snort. A rudimentary wish, though we can't keep watching them for anthropological purposes, however amusing. We have long trumped the need for partition and forged into plurality, but laws of supply and demand still persist through the million divisions of the cosmic microwave. It's written into every galaxy: a hierarchy of needs will always apply.

"A universal language," Jesse continues to Mary-Beth, who wrinkles her nose in what appears to be bewilderment. "Prime numbers, pictograms — if only they'd send us something I can actually decipher."

We humour him. We tap on the ground: three long, three short, three long. The

earth shakes with it and so do their bodies.

"I *felt* that," Mary-Beth says, hand atop her chest, heart pumping in awe. "I felt it all through me!"

"Help!" Jesse, loud into her ear. "They need help! S.O.S! They're reaching out!"

Mary-Beth braces herself as Jesse calls out, "Nothing to fear! Show yourselves!" She surveys the field frantically, but there's no movement other than the familiar brush of soft grain on her shoulders. The two of them stand, scarecrow-like, for a good ten minutes of expectation.

"Well, they heard me talk about settling," Jesse finally mutters. "Maybe . . . they want my help for their arrival!" He turns to Mary-Beth. "Quick, I can get this straightened out. The correct and official way. I'll contact the Canadian Placement Agency."

"What?" Mary-Beth gasps. "That means cameras, maybe, a whole bunch of people coming here. We can't do that!"

Her cries go unheeded as Jesse types furiously. "Connection's spotty — ah, here we go — oh, Jesus, this form," he says, squinting into his iPhone. "It's practically illegible."

"Please don't fill it out," Mary-Beth wails. "My husband will be furious."

"You're right," Jesse says, "this will take too long. I'll just call them."

"No!" Mary-Beth attempts to snatch the phone from Jesse's fingers, but he's already speaking into it. "Hello? Yes, department of . . . foreign affairs, please? I'm

trying to set up some paperwork for an immigrant. Well . . . interstellar, I'd say. Now, please stay calm and understand that I'm a registered ufolgist. I've just received verified proof that a foreign species will be settling in Canada and is requesting aid for the necessary legalities."

Mary-Beth holds her breath, but lets the air leak out when Jesse's face morphs from anticipation to anger. "Of course I'm serious, I'll give you my credentials, and I wouldn't involve this kind of authority if I didn't think that it was *serious* —"

Despite herself, Mary-Beth feels a twinge of sympathy. She can imagine the face of the person on the other end of the line: the frosted, stubborn disbelief she's all too familiar with.

"Why is it so difficult to believe?" Jesse spits into the receiver. "This is supposed to be a *mosaic*, for Chrissake."

The wheat shivers. Mary-Beth can't shake the feeling that something's watching her, but she tries to force it away. She looks to Jesse. "Hung up on me," he says forlornly.

"Maybe I was just imagining the feeling," Mary-Beth says, and cringes at how crestfallen he looks. "I mean, I must have been. I've imagined things before, heard things, got carried away. It can get you into trouble."

"I'm aware," Jesse groans. "Look, the sun will go down in a couple hours, I need to find them, I didn't drive all afternoon for nothing, I'm —"

"Hey," Mary-Beth says softly, "why don't we take a quick breather? You look like you could use something to eat."

She picks up the container of coffee cake and offers him a slice. After a pause, he takes one. They sit down to eat amongst the grain.

Prime intergalactic foodstuffs come in a wide spectrum. We choose colourful cuisines from various planetary palates — a balanced diet of different orbits, matter, gasses, stardust. It's no secret that variety is the key to longevity in life, after all.

The human brain is a rather unique delicacy. Torn away intact, preserved in space brine, it is consumed raw with an avant-garde *squelch* but can also be appropriated into a range of snacks and useful materials. Dehydrated medullas make for surprisingly good insulation in sub-universe temperatures, while we enjoy roasting cerebellum over suns, the nuclei *pop-pop-popping* into a crunchy, semi-nutritious snack.

We watch Mary-Beth and Jesse's conversation as we adjudicate their candidacy. Good motor skills, healthy skin tone, firm flesh. Though we understand the female's electrons are currently manipulated by medication, we are intrigued to see what novel tastes this may provide. We don't need to return with much matter, of course — one brain, after all, can feed us for many moons. Two would be better. Three would be spectacular. We consider the probability for this orchestration.

"This is good," says Jesse to Mary-Beth, waving a chunk of spiced leavened wheat, performing what they call *smiling*. We cannot help ourselves in feeling slightly moved. Eating together, quietly, they are as close to what we are as they could ever possibly be.

Perhaps guilt is a natural occurrence within any carnivorous being. We are not aware of the statistics. However, we justify our decision based on this place's history, in which things are taken, divided, industrialized, and harvested with such regularity that

it becomes a fundamental allowance of the state. These findings will prove true in any galactic court of justice, which the humans would perish before reaching, anyway.

"When I was younger," Mary-Beth tells Jesse, "my uncle used to tell me about the things he saw in the sky. He said — he said that there would be something coming for us. Always something coming for us. And I tried to tell everyone, to warn them, to collect all this evidence. I thought they'd bring me to see the Prime Minister. But instead they brought me to the hospital, and the doctors just told me that I'd inherited something terrible. And they put me on these pills that made things kind of fuzzy, and they only let me go when I was quiet."

Jesse watches her, her legs crossed and brows contemplative, silhouetted by stalks and sunset. It's a strange kind of intimacy, he thinks, that wheat fields permit.

"And you wound up here?" he asks her.

"I've tried to get better ever since," she shrugs. "I tried to be normal. I got married, I took my medication, I learned how to bake, even. But after all that, I still can't shake the feeling."

He nods. "I think I understand you."

"Yeah?" She brushes the crumbs from her mouth.

"I always felt like that, growing up in Saskatchewan. *Land of living skies*, everyone says, and my favourite thing used to be watching the sky at sunset. Imagining what else could be out there. The possibilities were endless, all those colours stretching forever and looking otherworldly, I guess. But now, more and more — even though it's

my job — all I see when I look up is, like, pollution and cell phone signals and wires criss-crossing, and I feel like we're just ruining the capacity for extraterrestrial contact by boxing ourselves in with our own neuroses, and that we're just starved . . . yeah, starved for something."

How stupid this man is, we sigh, and permit him some pity. His brain imitates the prairie corn's husk: layers of tough, surplus romanticism. Silky with false philosophies. We tend to season the dura mater to mask the flavour of its self-importance.

The humans preoccupy themselves with the parameters of their own destruction far too often. It is simple. A hierarchy of needs. Supply and demand. This is what all things boil down to.

As if on cue, our two subjects move closer, compelled by one such inner need. They are like planets, powerless against the urgings of their own gravity. We suspected it would not take long. It is somewhat charming how easily they have forgotten about us. They move hesitantly toward one another, begin to touch their mouth-organs in breathy permutation.

All life, we know, comes down to this. Even in acts of creation there is a kind of consumption, too. We sense that the time for harvest draws near, as she begins to simulate swallowing him.

David brushes wheatstalks aside, biceps pumping with the same adrenaline that propels men into battle. "Little motherfuckers," he mutters, tracing the two sets of footprints

embedded through the field. "Think you can come in here and flatten *my* crops. Think you can make a fool outta me with your goddamn alien circles . . . well, I'll show you." His breaths come in short bursts. "I'll be teaching *you* a lesson."

His body, though bulky, makes little noise as he pads through the wheat, the wheat that grew from his father's fields and his father's father's fields and therefore his own. As the footprints fall quicker, so does his pace. He breaks into a full-blown run, tracing, following, fumbling — and trodding, suddenly, on unexpected flesh.

It takes a moment to fully register.

"Mary . . . Mary-Beth?"

There is only the brilliance of the sunset, reflected off the shiny calibers of his rifle, before two gunshots are heard in quick succession. A kind of a roar, an animal keening. Then a third shot is fired, and all is quiet.

We are not a murderous species. Let that be clear. But we have studied enough Shakespeare, world wars, soap operas, genocide, shopping sprees, massacres, and Saskatchewan winters to know that humans tend to work death out for themselves. It's merely a matter of managing our timing.

The harvest begins. From the three bodies, we gently extract the necessary fragments. Brains are a marvel of evolution; no matter how they are shattered, their intricate patterns allow us to understand how to piece them back together again.

It is time to bid farewell to these skies. In our last look, we can acknowledge their aesthetic brilliance: sun running down the wheat in crushed persimmon, in gulping

totality which, it seems, echoes a kind of hunger, too. Brightness gives way into blackness. As it does for all beings, eventually.

LES SOEURS GRISES

A - U - J - O - U - R - D - 'H - U - I - ? It's the dead of February and Soeur Noëlle is still coaxing Soeur Aimée into visiting Place d'Armes. They thread ribbons into their typewriters; the O's and I's stand in embossed gold; snow flurries past the stained glass and it looks like the world is gyrating in colour. Soeur Aimée types N - O - N.

Soeur Noëlle sighs beside her; she wants to go before the thaw, before the crowds start up again.

P - O - U - R - Q - U - O - I P - A - S?

She knows why Soeur Aimée shakes her head. Five years until the *fin de siècle* and glamour has swallowed virtue. The new statue at Place D'Armes is a mockery of charity — too lavish. It's a subtle insult to them, the women of Montréal cloaked in shale-coloured linen, *Les Soeurs Grises*.

À D - E - M - A - I - N? Soeur Noëlle is persistent.

Before Soeur Aimée can reply, dictation begins. Soeurs Aimée and Noëlle can type quickly because their hands are young and keen and dexterous. Old Soeur Placide stumbles over the keys. *Stupide!* she mutters.

Soeur Noëlle likes typing. She finds it easier than *la confession*. They've instituted classes in the convent, and since then her sins have grown heavier. Thoughts become harder, bolder, more real when they come out of a machine. If the clergy could read what she types alone — but N - O - N.

The great hall of the Grey Nuns motherhouse is filled with the sound of metal hammers refracting off the golden columns, the crucifixes, the colossal oil likenesses of

Christ. It echoes up, up, up into the rafters.

L' - É - T - E - R - N - E - L V - I - T Q - U - E L - A M - É - C - H - A -
N - C - E - T - É D - E - S H - O - M - M - E - S É - T - A - I - T G - R - A - N -
D - E S - U - R L - A T - E - R - R - E . . .

Genesis. She can type it with eyes closed: The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of his heart was only evil continually.

<placeholder="blank"> Bruno Levesque types ten hours a day from his basement suite in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce. He can't see out of his ice-crusting windows five months of the year and he works with a Dell laptop that purrs like a snowblower. A tensor bandage lives on one wrist because at twenty-three, he's joined the ranks of coders who have succumbed to the dreaded carpal tunnel, their tendons aged decades.

The day begins as it always does, with <meta name="description" content="Watch hot sexy nuns fetish catholic girls nun costumes free trial videos priests fucking nuns XXX">. It's a living thing, this freelance gig; the keywords are always crying out for optimization.

The homepage footage is glitching again. <video controls autoplay> <source src="2nunsteaser.mp4"> pixelates their skin, freezes their shapes in perpetuity.

This is the land of *Les Soeurs Grises*. The website's stars wear nothing but Halloween-costume habits and specialize in finding creative uses for rosaries. Bruno has Photoshopped ALL EXCLUSIVE ACCESS, \$5.99/MONTH over so many shots of

hairless genitalia that, some days, they stop looking like bodies at all.

His familiarity here is tinged with irony. In *la vraie vie*, he is a virgin. French-kisser only, a malcontent Mary in the here and now. Always tripping over his words, fiddling with his phone, daydreaming, missing whole chunks of conversation. So much so that his last attempted *aimant* broke things off via text message. *Bruno*, his iPhone read, *tu n'habites pas à réalité, so I thought this method was more appropriate. This isn't working for me. I hope you understand.*

One condescending emoticon. :)

He will only complete one project this morning and then awaken, splash his face with water, leave this place. On the coldest day of the year, he tells himself, Bruno Levesque will find salvation in reality.

It's a pity there are no typewriters in the confessional. Père asks for her *péchés*, and Noëlle is silent. "*Mon enfant?*" he gently prompts her. Her face is obscured by the lattice yet she still feels naked.

"I — I am reading too much, I suppose. Lingering too much there, instead of being present in the world."

"Ah, *plus d'imagination*. You must work to control this trait. God has bestowed within you this kind of dreaminess as a test — an exercise of your resolve." Of course.
P - R - O - V - I - D - E - N - C - E D - I - V - I - N - E.

She can't talk to Père. There are Catholic confessions and then there are things that women never speak of. Instead she types on the Remington, and she falls into texts.

She reads Gaspé, Dickens, Tolstoy's religious fervour. Virtuous Father Sergius and his hermitage, his iron will. Soeur Noëlle is someone who plunges hard into narratives. When Sergius chops off his finger she wants to be present, suck the blood off the holy stump.

Nearly every night Soeur Noëlle coaxes her body into a tempo that is too animal, too far from God. At the moment of climax she ceases to belong in His world. There is no earth, no heaven, no *feu de diable*, it's all fuzz and fresh snow. Four to five seconds and then she is back, body uncurling, wiping her fingers on her thighs and praying that the snores of her surrounding *soeurs* are unbroken. On some level she knows her animal-body is satisfied, and this is shameful, but it is the blank moment in her brain that truly scares her.

"And we're going to see that foolish statue," she tells Père, and he laughs, and says things are worth experiencing. He does not know the secrets of her sleeping place, the things hidden under the mattress. He gives her the usual three Hail Marys. She prays for forgiveness.

Bruno rides the metro downtown, seeking flashing neon, streets full of hurried strangers. He figures his cure is newness. No HTML, real flesh. The cold disappears up the stairwell of the Super Sexe, and he sits in its bingo-hall decor while the day-shift girls grind before him.

There is a bruise and small pimple on this dancer's ass, and he wishes temporarily that he could *CTRL+J < surface blur < layer mask* reality. She is not as energetic as *Les*

Soeurs. She's probably tired from a late shift; her toes an angry red, compressed in plastic heels. We're all animals, he thinks, prone to exhaustion, prone to suffering. No wonder porn is *un mal nécessaire*.

Bruno eats breakfast as he watches: eggs, bacon, toasted baguette, fatty *pâté*, orange juice and vodka. The food is better than the music. There are no bad baguettes in Montréal, not even in strip clubs. He is halfway finished when one of the girls locks eyes with him, walks over.

She smiles and presses a hand to his chest.

"Ça va?" Her eyes are telling. No doubt they want to capitalize on the meager clientele of this Tuesday.

"*D'ou viens-tu?*" she asks, now rubbing his neck. "You're from where?" She probably assumes he's a foreigner — likely American — here to see the famed special. The Saint Catherine's girls whose R's come up from their throat, who can be touched in a way you can touch no other Northern dancers.

She seems frustrated at his hesitance, lifting his tensor-bandaged hand and pressing it near her breast. He can feel her pulse, sure and steady, below it. There is the morning's coffee on her breath, glitter in her pores and this heaviness about her, too much, like she could come crashing down on him at any minute.

"Thank you." He uses English. "God, I mean — thank you. I'm just all right on my own for now. I'd rather just watch."

She gives him a curt smile. "Will you take another drink, then?"

"Oh," he says. "No — no, thank you." He is one big runtime error in his refusal. Why didn't he just order a drink? Now he can't change his mind, he'll look stupid, and it's

his fault, he thinks. It's the house rules: she needs to sell things, all flustered and impatient, like some oath is bearing down on her.

A bzzzzzzzzzz.

"Sorry, I need to . . ." Bruno's phone signals eighteen new emails and he shoves his money onto the table. As he walks out it feels like the room turns glittery omniscient, all these eyes watching him with ire.

It's started to flurry outside. He sees *COLOR: #FFFFFF; snow[i].sink=sinkspeed *snow[i].size/5*; Rue Saint Catherine in whiteness.

"There are diversities of gifts, but they are divested by the same Spirit," whispers Soeur Noëlle. Corinthians. She knows the old qualms of the body, coming from tiny Saint-Jérôme where snow rose seven feet each winter and her teenage form became hot coal, a currency. At sixteen there were paths set through all this, to marriage or spinsterhood or salvation, and the rosary seemed least bitter of the three. She married God, married His world by extension.

Now, Soeur Noëlle thinks, her world is a satisfied spouse. She prepares meals for neverending mouths, carves wax Baby Jesuses to raise money for the parish. She types letters urging nurse training for typhus and cholera, and sees her name, N - O - Ë - L - L - E, clean and straight-lined, in the newspaper.

And, alone at night, she writes.

It comes on like a fever, these scenes from her fingertips:

All the apostles stripped of their robes.

The rush of wet tongues and razored jaws.

Saint Benedict naked in his nettle brushes.

M - O - N D - I - E - U, M - O - N D - I - E - U.

Saint Teresa and her angel; how, Noëlle begs Him, could a mind not be tempted?

The story of her breast pierced with the fiery spear of God, and her body writhing in ecstasy. *The pain was so great it made me moan*, wrote Theresa, *yet so surpassing was its sweetness, I could not wish to be rid of it.*

Twenty-three years old with a mind like a Bosch painting. Noëlle finishes her pieces clammy and shamefaced. She tucks them under her bed with the others, to be read and reread again.

Now, she types J - E V - O - U - S S - A - L - U - E M - A - R - I - E J - E
V - O - U S S - A L - U - E M - A - R I E J E VOUS SLALUE MARI-ËRB-ALFHDI
FSLA-BFJSALU FLB-FLÈ S,DLFJSD,GK on the Remington, typebars jamming
together, keys sticking —

"About ready to leave?" says Soeur Aimée from the doorway.

Soeur Noëlle jumps, a choir of nerves belting high E.

"Just a moment," she says, pulling the paper out. "Let me put on something warmer."

She pulls herself into her winter coat and, as Soeur Aimée turns, stuffs the notes under her sheets. She catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror, and is revolted — this body sweating and red under the fur collar, burrowing things like a fat squirrel in winter.

The smiling barista could be his savior, thinks Bruno. Ponytailed and apple-cheeked, with the Second Cup logo glowing behind her like a halo. Despite the apron, he can make out her body type: slim-hipped with a sudden burst of sports bra, a *<title>big natural amateur sister</title>* in his Excel categories.

He pours cinnamon into his cup slowly, watching her froth a cup of milk. It's simple enough: *ça va? Beaucoup de neige, non?* Palm sweat on the shaker.

Non. He's missed his chance; she's already turned away to serve the next customer. He exits wanly onto Saint Catherine St., but before he can pull up his hood, a voice stops him.

"Bruno Levesque?"

It's an old woman cloaked in a heavy habit, hands in a fur muff, with vaguely familiar eyes. Bruno stammers a *bonjour*. "Soeur . . ."

"Must you stoop down to recognize your former schoolteacher? My, you've grown taller."

"Soeur Patrice," he exhales.

"I must look older to you now," she clucks. "But I can still recognize *you*."

Bruno is not the best at eye contact, but he's flooded with recognition as he looks into hers. The same appraising steeliness.

"Well, what are you doing with yourself? You must be finished school now. Are you studying? Working?"

"Working," Bruno repeats.

"Ah. What do you do?"

It's been six months and Bruno has learned to lie in a way that puts his social anxiety to shame. Six months of telling his parents he optimizes an online travel planner, pretending splayed legs are palm trees, *<meta content="69">* is an area code. Back in *école secondaire* they would swipe their *père's* Playboys, crowding around in a pimply coltish fervour, but that time now seems so far away. He thinks of those loveless nuns, scarier than Satan to any sexed-up teenage boy. If he speaks the truth, she'll probably slap him across the face — but today, of all days, he is supposed to be real.

"I do marketing," he says tonelessly.

"How interesting," Soeur Patrice replies, her eyes sharp as ever. "Bruno, will you accompany me to Vieux-Montreal?" The question comes quickly, but it is not really a question. "I must collect a few things from Notre Dame. You'd spare a few minutes to keep an old woman company, wouldn't you?"

Bruno fingers his phone, its gloss comforting as smooth beads. It vibrates. An easy out.

"Well —"

"Excellent." She takes his arm. "We'll take the metro."

Nearing Place d'Armes, Soeurs Noëlle and Aimée find themselves amidst a flurry. Soeur Noëlle can barely make out Le Patronage d'Youville, where their nuns shelter new immigrants in exchange for hearing the word of God. "*Les grises*," a little boy shouts at them, and his snowball-wielding companions giggle. The unfortunate homonym: *drunken women*. As though they'd imbibe, risk unleashing a wildness. Nevertheless, Soeur Noëlle

crosses herself. She feels better when the white world fades them.

As Bruno and Soeur Patrice exit Station Place D'Armes, Bruno winds his scarf around his face. He knows in Vieux-Montréal, at least, there's no chance of running into anything real. It's a pretend-Paris, a sham. The city promotes an old-fashioned innocence; it says that buildings cannot rise higher than the mountain's cross, this all-seeing avatar. But in February, its roads starved for spring, there is a tautness like the tension that precedes orgasm. Snow compacts. People shove. Cars collide. It infuses bodies, too. Bruno walks against the wind, savouring the weight of it, despite its bite.

Something about the snow makes Soeur Noëlle feel bolder. Without a clear view of the roads, it's as though they're walking inside clouds. Or a fresh, unmarked sheet of

P - A - P - I - E - R.

"They mock us," comes Soeur Aimée's voice, somewhere behind her. "*Les grises, les grises*. As though we're animals."

"Yes," says Soeur Noëlle, after a pause.

They plod along. "Although," Noëlle continues slowly, "do you ever feel that way?"

"Which way?"

"Like an animal."

Sister Noëlle expects to hear Soeur Aimée's laughter, but there's only silence.

She can't glimpse her face under the furs.

"How do you mean?" Soeur Aimée eventually replies.

"I mean," Soeur Noëlle says, and then, "I know we belong to *notre Père céleste*.

But sometimes I feel as though my body gets away from me, it is too human, too . . . hungry."

Soeur Aimée is quiet. Perhaps in solemn acknowledgment, Soeur Noëlle thinks. She takes a breath and plunges onward.

"This is why I wanted to see the statue."

"*Pardon?* The statue?"

"They said it's the most realistic carving in the city. This modern triumph. And I wanted —" Soeur Noëlle drops her voice even lower. "I wanted to see the flesh up close."

Soeur Aimeé stops walking.

"Why are you telling me this?" comes her voice.

Soeur Noëlle attempts a laugh. "Do you not understand me? I think about it, always, and I think you do too."

"Why don't you speak about it in *la confession*?" Now Soeur Aimée faces her with a panicked look. "Why did you bring me here? What role in this plot do you want me to play?"

"No," Soeur Noëlle says frantically. "It is all — simply in my head — do you not know what I mean?"

Soeur Aimée's breath steams out in front of her. Behind it, her eyes slowly meet Soeur Noëlle's own.

"If we only use our minds," Soeur Noëlle whispers, "where is the real act

of wrongfulness?"

But Soeur Aimée is all steam now. "Oh, all this way for . . . this?" she huffs. "I'm leaving. I won't tell anyone, but Noëlle —" She meets her eyes briefly again. "I advise you to leave, too."

Soeur Noëlle watches her retreat, the gray form retracing its fresh footprints. Soon there is nothing but whiteness around her and, as she turns eastward, a glimpse of bronze ahead. The work of the new century. Soeur Noëlle can't help but cross herself. It gleams like the A - S - D - F - G of every typewriter.

Bruno and Soeur Patrice walk until they find themselves at the base of the *monument à Maisonneuve*. He expects them to pass onto Notre Dame, but Soeur Patrice stops. They're the only two people visible on the biting day, and these bronze figures are the closest thing to an audience. At its base are the city's founders: Le Moyne, Closse, the Iroquois warrior, nurse Jeanne Mance. Inert like *#outer {position: fixed;}*, bodies life-sized and impressively realistic.

On the metro ride Soeur Patrice remained quiet, the car hushing slightly as they entered, her habit flowing behind her. But now she speaks candidly. "What do you think of them?"

"Well . . . I like them," Bruno says truthfully. This is why he took the freelance project, after all: the coldness of not knowing a body, bodies everywhere foreign and covered, the strange sequestration of flesh.

"I thought so. You've always had a quiet consideration for people. Such an

internal fellow, Bruno. You know . . . "

She pats his arm gently. "I've always thought you would make a good priest."

Bruno coughs. "*Pardon?*"

"You have the ideal temperament," Soeur Patrice continues. "A gentle, inquisitive nature that could benefit the Lord."

"I . . ."

Think about it," Soeur Patrice says, before she departs.

Bruno watches her form retreat towards Notre Dame. Despite the cold, he finds his hand reaching out in a kind of farewell, his bad wrist numbing, the world turning white and unbreakable like the bits of `</header></body>` eternal in another stream.

Then back to the statue. His touch roams until it catches a part of the metal that is the opposite of everything smooth, a small patch that feels out-of-place, like bronze has given way to something fleshier. It's on the face closest to him. If he closes his eyes and keeps his hand there, it could be something living.

Soeurs Noëlle circles the statue. Despite its excess, she finds it beautiful. These bodies are carved with exquisite detail, revealing three-dimensional musculature she's been taught to ignore. The surprising shape of a calf; shirts exposing the tendons of a neck, arched over a bust. The snow slips down their metal skin.

Soeur Noëlle nears the face of one of the figures. Close to her is a bronze mouth, curved just like a real beating-heart body, and suddenly her tongue finds its way out of

her lips and against it.

Just four seconds, four to five seconds and she feels the cold crystallizing, a sharp surprise, a pink piece of her remaining as she tears away, I - M - P - R - I - M - É!

Soeur Noëlle swallows a mouthful of blood.

She steps back, shivering with adrenaline, the print of flesh hot in her mouth. It hurts in the way that all proper Catholic salvation should. P - E - N - A - N - C - E. Something on display for eternity.

Slowly, she unfastens the silver cross from her neck, lets it fall without ceremony into the snow.

She thinks of the older *Soeurs*, their hardness, and the gray-shadowed crypt of the convent where they will all eventually lay. The nuns are taught to hope for incorruptibility; no decomposition, the everlasting flesh that signifies saintliness. But if her body rots, Soeur Noëlle decides, she won't despair. A part of her is seared static on bronze now. Amidst all the whiteness, she is remade.

DINNER WITH THE LYNX

For my first trick, I'll send a solicitation from the North's loamy soils. I'll send it over fritzing Wi-Fi to her Highness, a 140-character enchantment. In short, I'll Tweet the Queen.

The Queen through the royal henchmen handling her Twitter account. I message Buckingham Palace before she begins her tour; her last one, they say. She's visited Toronto and Ottawa and Victoria times before, but it's an inaugural stop up here — the clammy tree-lined enclaves of Yellowknife, its name already too menacing.

This trick, like all tricks, seems unfathomable until the finale when the magic seeps out — a reply for old @JackwiththeHat and his big idea. The Queen? No, but an email from some sort of Buckingham digitized knight. He tells me her Highness is seeking to visit the *true* North. And what better backdrop for Mother Nature than my plot of land? The mayor of Yellowknife vouches for me, as I performed at his last birthday party and used dry ice to form politically tasteful caricatures of the Arctic Caucus. And *voila*. The act is set.

The premise is this: I will pull not a downy snow hare out of thin air but its sworn predator, the lynx. It will emerge for her Highness, grace our supper with its savage glory, and then I'll disappear it back into the ether. The feat will be photographed and uploaded to several news sites — *Queen Gets Up Close with Canadiana*. If she would prefer, I type graciously, we can switch it to afternoon tea. The reply comes quickly: no, dinner, they say, will be perfect.

I must comply with all security measures and sign verbose waivers first, of

course. Modernity and the monarchy are a strange illusion. She can't exit the Palace without a bodyguard, but I'd wager she couldn't start a hashtag to save her life. I have ten thousand followers on Twitter and I walk Wiley Road unbothered, save for the locals' hellos. For now. Somehow, I feel it's in the cards.

A Canadian lynx looks like a jaguar crossed with a Joker. The ears have pointed tufts like a jester's cap. Of course, it's furrier and paler than a jaguar: a cat in an Abominable snowsuit, with a wide, clownish-striped ruff. Its tail is truncated severely, a black bob of coal on the rump. Paws like snowshoes, big as a man's face.

I set out raw chicken on my back porch and lure nothing but squirrels. I shove pet-store mice into cages and curse Copperfield when the raccoons chew through the wire. Finally, I smoke half a joint on the porch, fill up with my fifty-year-old exhaustion and enough rye, and I see a face. For a second I mistake it for a woman meeting my eyes through the trees.

There's a reason they call Mother Nature a cruel mistress up here. The shape-shifting *aurora borealis* is named after a Roman goddess, playing tricks with the sky in a manner that could drive a grown man insane. And *lynx* means *to shine* in Greek, light off the eyes like diamonds. I've never been married, but for some reason I think of the feminine when I see something powerful in the wild. This sort of awe — a slight animalistic hackling of my hair.

So, as the lynx steps slowly forward, I meet her gemstone gaze and name her Pretty Woman (after the Orbison song, not the Roberts film). "Here, kitty-kitty," I

whisper.

The midsummer sky illuminates her. She slips through the gate, her mammoth footsteps soundless. As she wraps her lips round rotted chicken bones I consider changing my Twitter handle to something better, something more serious. Something like @KingoftheWild.

It's all about placement. The position of an innocent card, angled to appear out of thin air; the finesse of fitting a coin indecipherably in your palm. And so I choose my plot carefully, shoving a spade in the earth to dig up twined roots.

I know about perimeters. My yard is already lined with a three-metre fence to ward off wayward bears. Pretty Woman, despite her clownish paws, is about the size of a Labrador Retriever. I tack chicken wire to the wood so she can't dig her claws in, and I let her roam. She stays near the border at first, ears flattened, but slinks closer after a couple hungry days. I throw her chicken livers.

She's a young one, I can tell. Jumpy, swiping at the gray jays clumsily; I doubt she's kittenized yet. Skinny, too. Lucky that I've caught her — we're in a low lull of the lynx-rabbit cycle. When the population of snow hares increases, the lynx breed and grow large, glossy-haired. The rabbits run their course and the lynx turn lean and sparse. It goes by decade, they told me. I've called these outskirts of Great Slave Lake home for nearly ten years and I can see what was spawning is now slowing, the orbit of birds, blackflies, even the tamarack trees stalling. Nature shuffles the deck with all fairness, I suppose.

The hole I'm digging is my Yellowknife homage to Houdini. It's firm earth, but I've got a miner's muscle memory. And sweating is beneficial — Pretty Woman gets accustomed to my scent and, as long as her stomach's full, I'm an ally. Her trust will be integral in this act.

I love to watch her as she tunes in to a frequency I can't pick up, the syncopated pulse of ants' footsteps or far-off avian wings. Her whole musculature tenses, her eyes strain, though the world remains unchanged and placid to me.

I've barely tasted my coffee before the chatter starts. "We've heard about your trick, Jack."

Breakfast at the Wildcat Cafe means a drive through Old Town, but today I'm the talk of its log house, a crowd angling around my long table. A few tourists pick at their bannock and remain uninterested. Though I've been here for nearly a decade, I'm still no born-and-bred-here type, so my tricks can elicit suspicion. But it's fresh conversation, at least.

"Why a lynx?" Pat wants to know. "A wolf, a wood bison, yeah, just head over over to the Mackenzie. But a lynx? How are you gonna get yourself one of those?"

I used to work Giant Mine with Pat and know his penchant for methodology. "Well," I reply wryly, "magic, of course." They hoot and holler. "Maybe your magic can pay our tab," says Anak.

Of course the lynx is elusive, its snowy fur evading even the expert hunters. Rare as Houdini's elephant — and they believed its tusks, its folded trunk would be lost forever

after he vanished it. The cries of that crowd.

"You gonna answer that thing?" Their eyes linger on my phone, its body buzzing face-down on the table every few minutes. Well, most men my age stick to bare-bones Facebook. But I've learned how to make myself seen.

"I've got to match the momentum," I explain. "Word is spreading fast and I need to capitalize on the attention — gain more followers, answer all my emails. Might upload some photos of the lynx soon."

They exchange looks. "You've actually trapped one?"

"Careful, Jack," says Bo, a net over her hair like a raven's nest. "You mind what you mess with."

I shrug as she pours more coffee, but we both know the land can play tricks right back. I've picked up on the cautiousness here, bred from the place's history — back to the '50s, when Dené children died eating arsenic-laced snow. We learned techniques of careful extraction in the mines, rules created after that comeuppance. I've tried to incorporate these tactics into my dealings with the lynx, but the sheer magnificence of it all seems to suggest our meeting was fated. Me, Jack, a magician for the ages.

We're getting closer, me and Pretty Woman. I learn that her meow is high-pitched as a bird's song. I learn her favourite toys are rolls of paper towel, easily shredded. She play-fights with me, now, and I spray her with cinnamon water when she gets too rough.

I have her practice jumping in and out of the hole upon my command. There will be the trap door, sliding horizontally, to work around, but it's this — appearing,

disappearing silently — she must master. She's a quick learner, figuring things out on her own. Autodidactic, like me. Maybe we smell it in each other.

But when midsummer stretches to maximum daylight, she gets restless. She stalks the perimeter of the yard, panting. She catches crows and leaves them mangled and bloody, half-breathing. I'm no expert, but I think she's in heat.

"How are you today?" I ask her one morning, and she snaps at me in reply — the big canines shining, all fang.

"No," I hiss. Dominance. I learned dominance from the internet. Never delete a Tweet, never acquiesce to a troll. This defense feels like it was born out of primal intuition, so I think it'll work on the wild.

Though so often I'm stricken by our similarities. We rely on eye contact, we twitch in our dreams. She preens like a lady while I take photographs. "Pretty - Pretty - Pretty!" I can't help but cooing, the kohl-black around her eyes like welled oil. She loses patience with the camera and my photos come out blurry, colours hazed like a season in flux.

I'm late to meet the mayor at the Gold Range. Running up 50th Street to the bar, I notice a few heads turning — even some unfamiliar faces whispering. My act is gaining offline momentum, it seems.

I find the mayor under mounted antlers at a knife-etched table, looking a tad out-of-place in my choice venue. I breathe in the welcome scent of old smoke, and he hits me with all this talk of tactics. "So," he rambles on, "we're putting a bunch of baseball

bleachers along your fence for the crowd. And the bathrooms: a row of Porta-Potties, naturally. Catering is all set up for our private dinner with the Queen; the crowd will be permitted entry after, in the evening. Oh, yes, security. Aside from her guards, we'll get that sorted. Also, we've hired a — what are they called — a decorator, some kind of landscape *artiste* to jazz up your yard. What are your thoughts on a red carpet? I was thinking — "

"Hey." I haven't had enough to drink for this. "You let me know who to talk to, I'll figure out how to arrange it. But right now I just need to focus on the act. And the lynx."

"Right." Now he fixes his eyes on me. "That's all going as planned? I have to confess, I'm a tad nervous . . . a wild animal, after all . . . how *are* you going to do it?"

"A magician never reveals his secrets," I grin.

He raises an eyebrow, then beckons the bartender. This is how I get people to buy my drinks.

We order Wild Turkey on the rocks. Welder's Daughter starts up a country instrumental, slow and winding, and I lean closer.

"I'm not telling you the whole deal," I begin, "but first of all, you should know that Houdini used very strategic placement. Got that? Months of planning, audience perspective, lighting, maybe even mirrors. This time of year, the light gives us a certain advantage. Picture a lynx stepping calmly to my command, a few people helping me hold up a curtain in front of her. Hey, you can even be one of them. And then — " I flick my wrist. "Curtain aside, big cat vanished. The crowd gasps. Look at the Queen! She's fanning herself. Now, I've got acreage to work with . . . "

It happens slowly — the dim sensation of pressure, a growing awareness that something is wrong. I pass out over the covers after coming home from the bar, and when I open my eyes to the dawn, Pretty Woman is atop my chest.

I can smell her first. Something primal, like flesh and sex and all the seasons. With her monster paws upon me I can barely breathe, and she stiffens the push of my ribs, the white of her ruff against my face.

It would take two seconds for her teeth to reach my neck. This is a moment which requires extreme fastidiousness, yet all I can think of is Roy Orbison — *don't let the wild life hurt you*, played on a scratchy Pioneer.

Don't, Orbison sings inside my skull, *let this old world turn you*. So I don't. I go limp as possible as the lynx sinks her claws into my chest, the tips puncturing the skin.

"No," I cough. "Bad girl."

Her breath so close, that sweet-meaty smell. She growls. Or is it a purr? I can't tell if the tone is murderous or maternal.

I inch one hand toward the bedside table, making for the old .45. There's too much crap in my way — cigarettes, junk mail, chargers — but I manage to grip it, tilt my hand and shoot the ceiling. Chunks of drywall fall like moonscape. Pretty Woman jumps, clean out of the room. Blood comingles with my chest hair, and I press the bedsheet against it to stem the flow.

When I make it into the kitchen, she's covered the floor in toppled, shattered houseplants. Aloe and cacti uprooted, a mess of dirt. I pick up a handful of earth and throw it at her. Dominance.

"We are *not*," I say, "fucking around anymore."

She blinks at me with the indifference only a cat can muster.

I retreat into the bathroom to pour the dregs of Canadian Club onto the wounds. In the toothpaste-splattered mirror my hair is gray, sunspots graze my face, and her paws have dug what look like clovers on my chest, one beneath each collarbone. Four pads, four claws, a bloodied imitation of flora.

Over the next few weeks, I take care to create the illusion of absolute control. Making Pretty Woman appear is easy — she loves jumping out of the earth, paws splayed proudly — but getting her to disappear is much harder. She fights it. Sometimes I'll have to abandon my hand signal and swing at her with my steel-toes to get her to jump. She'll make a funny sound, a kind of keening deep in the throat.

I keep getting Tweets: *how did u trap a wild animal? how the hell can you make a lynx disappear?* The suspicious critics say: *he's a crock moron lol there is no way the queen will be watchin this #bullshit*. The bleeding hearts say: *probably drugged the poor beast*. Well, let them crow. I've done my research, but it's mostly a matter of primal confidence, I think. *Mastery*. I've always wanted to be called a master of something. The history I studied built it up in me: dynasties, legacies, glorified kings. I can tell, from the micro-management of the mayor and the Palace, that they're suspicious of my capabilities. But they needn't worry. I can pull it from the deadened eyes of any human, this kind of awe. Sleight of hand is like slivers in ice, cracks forming deep and unseen in the floes until they split with the sound of gunpowder, the grate of subarctic diamonds.

The day of the royal arrival, I awake at five AM. I shave, sweep the dirt from under my nails, slip into my suit, schedule posts. Pretty Woman tears apart her morning chicken hearts as I chain-smoke.

My yard has been transformed into a rustic wonderland: cedar boughs artfully manipulated, mason jars atop painted farmhouse tables. The first of our exclusive dinner party appears for aesthetic approval — the mayor, council members, a few people from the school board and federal offices. Collectively, we're edgy and overdressed, as though we're attending a funeral. "Looking good, Jack," Blais from the Arctic Caucus heckles, though I feel the sweat on his palm as he shakes my hand. "Dressed up like you've got a hot date."

Finally, the car we're all waiting for — a silver monster with four-wheel drive — pulls up. A procession of guards emerges, fully armed as arranged, and the Queen follows in their wake. She looks small and stooped against the open sky. I watch them walk silently down the rose-strewn path, take their seats, camera flashing.

It's time. Beneath a birch arch and all summer's brightness, I find my place on the ground and brandish the curtain. "Ladies, gentlemen, Your Highness," I bow, "allow me to introduce our Northern glory, a rare piece of the wild Muskwa woods — Pretty Woman."

The lynx jumps out. Our small crowd murmurs, moves back a fraction. Pretty Woman

looks apprehensive upon sight of them, but keeps her distance.

"I've trained her well," I say. "You don't bother her, she won't bother you."

"Here, girl, *tsk-tsk-tsk*," calls the photographer, rubbing his fingers. She stares at him for a few seconds and then turns in the opposite direction, training her eyes on the trees. "Just like my Mittens," he sighs. We laugh.

I understand the lynx's reaction, though. I remember the feeling of surfacing from the earth. Stale mineshafts to cutting sunlight. The last thing you'd want to do was reach for another human being; no, you needed time to just steady your eyes, inhale that strange half-freedom.

The plates are set for dinner and food is carted out on silver trays. "Now for an intimate supper," the mayor beckons us, sliding out a chair at the table's head for the Queen. "I hope you enjoy the fruits of the land." We are served wild bison and grouse, heirloom carrots and chard. Something classical plays thinly; it sounds like it's evaporating in all the open space. We sip icewine and drink in the sight of the lynx, her silvery fur, her eyes meeting ours warily from the perimeter.

The Queen begins our conversation first. Her voice is higher than I'd expected, the accent unstiffened, perhaps due to age. "What a beautiful piece of land. Quite a ways from the city-centre, though. Is that a far drive for you?"

I remember my manners. "I suppose that's why I like it, Your Majesty. As Roy Orbison says, *only the lonely*."

"I see. And what first brought you to Yellowknife, Mr. . . ."

"Jack," I grin. "Just call me Jack." Her good breeding shows, as she fails to flinch when she spies my neglected teeth. "Mining, ma'am," I explain. "I got to know the territory quite well, working all around — the diamond mines at Snap Lake, the East Island. Giant Mine, until they had to shut it down."

"Quite a pronounced change. Miner to magician. What inspired you?"

"Oh, you know," I shrug. "I suppose I've always liked making things appear from nowhere." And, deftly, I slip a quarter from her unsmiling guard's ear.

I see the mayor blanch, but it earns a soft laugh from the Queen. Her guard remains stoic.

"I was informed that mining doesn't provide the city with much revenue presently," she continues. "You focus more on government services, now?"

"True," the mayor interjects. "Well, the trouble . . . anyhow, let's not focus on negatives. This change means we're fostering a different kind of community. Take Jack here: the most popular Canadian magician on social media! Who would've thought?"

"Technology," Blais says, "has changed everything."

The icewine makes me comfortable enough to laugh. "Sure," I say, "but it's only a small part of what I'd call, well, magic. I pull rabbits out of top hats for bars filled with all kinds of people — teenagers, tourists, those dirty miners — what gets them talking about it, though? You have to make them feel like everything's alive. Everything's got a stake in it. Not just the hat, but the stage itself, the sweat on the window, the beer in their glasses, it's all gone electric, conspiring to make something appear out of thin air. If you can play every piece right, that's the mark of a true magician."

The mayor shrugs. "I reckon it can go either way. Some things are simply

propelled by chance." He gestures to the coin. "Odds fifty-fifty."

I finger the quarter. The Queen's cameo glitters on one side, the caribou's outline on the other. They may believe in straight divides, but they don't have my magic. Mastery is what sways the odds.

I can't help but be enchanted by the pale, frail-boned woman. A fox-fur stole sits round her shoulders, and her sprinklings of jewels catch the sun. "And Her Majesty?" I ask.

"What do you think of Yellowknife so far?"

"Endless sky, so many trees." She delicately slices her bison. "You're very hospitable. One feels as though it's another world, here."

"Did you hunt that yourself?" I joke, gesturing to the stole.

"Jack," the mayor coughs, "you're awfully inquisitive. Pardon me, Your Highness."

But the Queen answers me. "Oh — why, no." She adjusts the stole. "I inherited it, but it was caught from the Windsor Estate." The fox's tiny eyes flash in the light, as though jeeringly alive.

"Quite a change from Buckingham Palace," Blais interjects. "These guards of yours aren't used to scaring off bears, ma'am?"

The Queen smiles a reserved smile. "Our grounds are impressively manicured," she says, "but now, I must admit, I fancy seeing the wildflowers grow over."

It's such a strange sight: the Queen and the lynx at opposing heads of my vision, like keepers of their own sovereignty. The Queen, despite her demure appearance, seems

to understand more than she lets on. I've often wondered if Pretty Woman can pick up on what lies deep underneath the soil — a trillion particles of arsenic trioxide, frozen golden poison. I don't know if the Queen knows about this, knows of anything past frigid winters and shining lights. Still, she and the lynx seem similar in their stillness, as if in contemplation of a silent hierarchy, a bleeding season, an invisible spell.

When the tables are cleared and the crowd begins to come in, filling the bleachers, my nerves start up again. All of Yellowknife has arrived, people snapping photos, filming videos behind the barricade. The sound of jays makes me hope someone is live-tweeting this.

I put leftovers into my palm and use them to coax Pretty Woman back underneath the birch arch. "Come," I demand. Steadfast commandment. The crowd hushes as she and I arrive, silhouetted in sunlight. We must appear so small before them — two figures against the vastness of the land. My ramshackle house, abnormal in its newfound fashions, sits over to the right; the boreal forest sways at the left and circles around, meeting the mouth of the lake somewhere beyond us.

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls," I announce, "Allow me to introduce our wild card."

Pretty Woman lets out a sudden hiss, as though prickled by the anticipation of the crowd. The first-row spectators shrink back.

I laugh grandly. "Don't you worry, folks. She's perfectly under my control." They laugh back, somewhat. "Before you witness this spectacle," I continue, "I'll need a few

volunteers to help me hold the curtain." My chosen crew begins to arise — but, to my surprise, the Queen raises her white-gloved hand.

"I shall," she says.

The crowd begins to murmur. I see the guards break their motionless ranks to whisper to one another, grips tightening on their rifles. Still, they don't lunge out to stop the Queen as she comes forward to grasp a velvet fold.

"Fantastic!" I call, trying to maintain an easeful tone. "Her Majesty has an unexpected magic touch."

The lynx is pacing before the crowd, ears back, that strange noise coming from her throat again. She's not getting into position. "Ahem," I say, "she's a tad temperamental. Just like a woman." At least that gains some laughs.

When Pretty Woman finally slips her bobtail behind the curtain, I seize the opportunity. "At last," I call, "the vanishing act."

The guards are now pointing their guns at us, fingers trained over triggers, ready to shoot at the slightest disturbance. I can't see the Queen; she's somewhere in front, gripping the curtain. Only Pretty Woman, eyes fixed, far too close to me than we'd practiced. It's too late; the show must go on. I have no aces up my sleeve.

"Abracadabra!" I cry, our key word amplified. The lynx leaps and from her claws something is sent falling to the ground — my heart, beating Jack.

A red-and-white playing card, my paper-milled likeness. It's perfect, just as I imagined it: curtain drawn, the gasps, the silent awe, and Pretty Woman spun into nothingness. The

Jack of Hearts flutters down upon the earth where she just stood.

And it's over so quickly, as all tricks are. I receive my congratulations and pose for photos, the same smiles uploaded into eternity. We walk the Queen towards her vehicle while the crowd, chattering again, follows in our wake.

"A grand pleasure, Jack," says the Queen before she departs. She shakes my hand, though I see her peering beyond my shoulder one last time, as though she expects the lynx to suddenly surface.

When my land's left in silence, I head back for Pretty Woman. A small, sinking part of me knows she did not obey my command in our act. Instinct tricked her in; she was frightened of all the eyes, distrustful of the commotion, colliding with my card trick in her urge to hide. Claw marks on my grand finale.

I slide apart the earth to release the lynx. She looks up at me, five feet in the ground. She has the land and sun and sky in her eyes, all shining, and in that moment I understand that she will forever be looking past me to something different entirely.